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THE
OSIRIS FILES

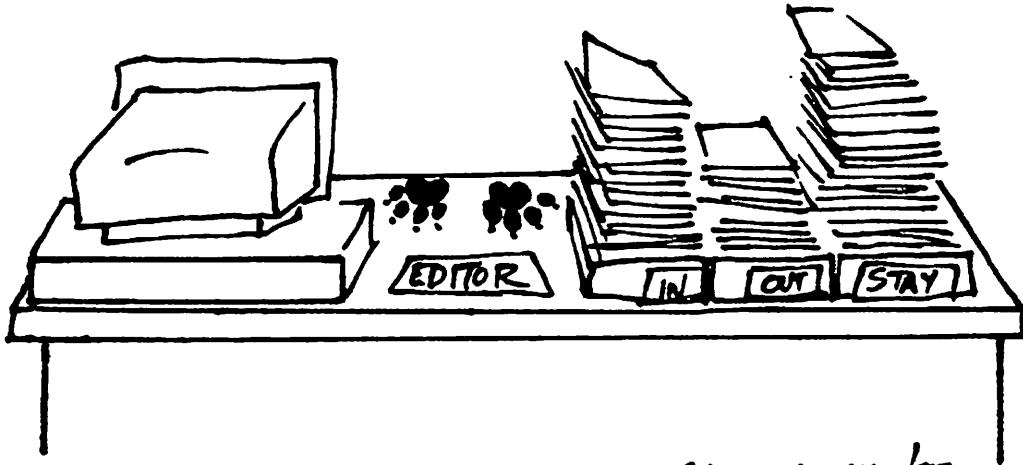


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THE OSIRIS FILES #4 is intended solely for the enjoyment of fans of media fantasy and science fiction. Submissions and letters of comment are both encouraged and welcomed. Correspondence requiring a reply should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. All correspondence will be considered for publication unless clearly noted otherwise. All submissions and correspondence should be addressed to **THE OSIRIS FILES**, c/o OSIRIS Publications, 8928 North Olcott Avenue, Morton Grove, Illinois 60053.

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FROM THE WOLFS/DMN EDITOR'S DESK: Of Joy and Sorrow...

It's been a long year since we last met, a year filled with many joys and sorrows. Instead of our customary editorial "soap-box," we'd like to share some of them with you.

Among the joys was the incredible opportunity to once again help raise and get to know another litter of timber wolf pups. As we told you last year, Boltar ("Super Stud") and Tokata ("Little Mother") Timber Wolf had a second litter of nine (!) on 1 May 1989. Eight of those pups survived their first year, and four -- a little female and three of her brothers -- are still in residence at the "wolf farm" in Wisconsin. Two others live in Oklahoma with three older siblings, and two are in northern Wisconsin, where their mother was born. Angelique, the little female known to one and all as Angel, is a dear, even if she does start all the fights, and tries to pick on her poor, long-suffering (and very patient) dad. Mom won't put up with her antics, but Boltar...

Our two-year-olds -- WaterLoo and her brothers Alpha (called Al), Bravo (aka Bill), Frosty, and Peter -- continue to grow and thrive. Al and Bill are already nearly as big as their father, and are nowhere near fully grown! They all look like mature adults now, rather than like the awkward, gangly adolescents they really are (and should resemble). They love peppermints, cheese, gummy bears, chow mein noodles, and cheap hot dogs (picture a shark feeding frenzy, then substitute wolves). As a well-known pro named Richard learned last November, Bill also loves leather hats...

Sorry, no new pups this year. The Timber Wolf Preservation Society has run out of lupine residential space, and can't afford to build more pens until we've raised the money to purchase our present site. So we separated our principal breeding pair during peak fertility (we weren't too worried about Tokata's sister NanTan and her "intended" Akila, who seems more interested in his brother Gray; can a wolf be "gay"?). Boltar wasn't overly thrilled -- but we suspect Tokata is grateful for a little time off from motherhood.

As for sorrows...

Maxwell, our big eleven-year-old wolf, has been failing for some months now. His spine was injured in a fight with five (!) younger wolves several years ago, causing certain nerves to deteriorate; now he has no feeling at all in his back legs. He is also diabetic, and has heart-worm (not, we should point out, necessarily fatal for a wolf, as it is for dogs). Our resident cripple can't walk, but he can still move pretty fast when he wants to (remember those hot dogs?); he has a good appetite (yumm! hot dogs!), and a great sense of humour. But he's getting weaker, and as the heat of summer approaches...

We promise you, as Jim Rieder of the Timber Wolf Preservation Society has promised us, that Max will not suffer. We all love him too much for that.

And an even greater sorrow...

Many of our friends in fandom at one time or another met Bridget, formally known as Bridget Britanny Flake, the OSIRIS Publications "Lunatic in Residence" and our little Britanny spaniel bitch (yes, you purists, of course we know the American Kennel Club doesn't consider the Britanny to be a spaniel any more, but what does the AKC know?). We're deeply saddened to report she died last year, at the ripe old age of...

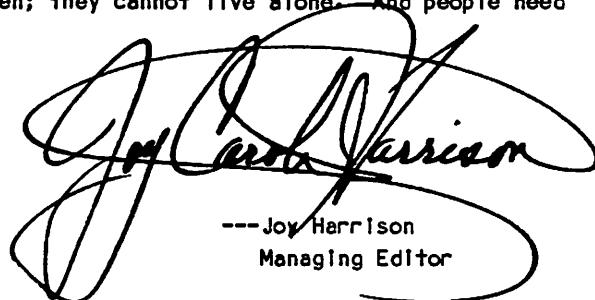
Well, no one knows exactly. You see, Bridget came to us from a wonderful place called Sav-A-Pet, where animals are given homes until they are adopted, or kept until they die of old age; they are never "destroyed." One day, not long after our malamute/timber wolf Flicka died of a stroke, we paid a visit to Sav-A-Pet, where we met a sweet, lovable, little brown-and-white loud-mouth with big, brown eyes. She looked so lonely and scared... We took her to our vet, who said, "Congratulations, you've found another winner," and told us she was about five, or six, or maybe seven years old...

We had Bridget (well, maybe she had us!) for nearly nine wonderful years. Yes, she was often loud (no better doorbell -- or burglar alarm! -- ever existed), and sometimes vulgar (that nose went into places no nose should go), always flaky (after all, she was a Britanny; the terms are synonymous), and frequently obnoxious (no, we won't tell you some of the things she ate). But she was also gentle, affectionate, intelligent...

Bridget was a trusted friend, a good companion, and more. Like all dogs, she had a knack for finding a way into people's hearts. She died of a stroke, on 15 October 1989.

Soon, we will pay a visit to our old vet, who takes in homeless wolves and finds them new families. And if no lost or unwanted dog is waiting for us there, we will go back to Sav-A-Pet -- because Bridget, like Flicka before her, taught us a valuable lesson, one we would share with all of you, because it's something everyone should know. Cats are independent; they don't need us, although we may need them. But dogs are like children; they cannot live alone. And people need animals as much as dogs need people.

Bridget, we miss you...



---Joy Harrison
Managing Editor

"Great Scotts"

(By Mary Robertson)

The only fitting description was chaos. Captain Jean-Luc Picard surveyed the normally peaceful bridge of the ENTERPRISE with a mixture of astonishment, awe, and -- as his gaze fell on an unfamiliar and highly inappropriate face -- a considerable degree of anger. "What," he bellowed over the cacophony of voices, "is that child doing on my bridge?"

The starship chose that moment to shake like a fevered drunk, causing already frenzied technicians to redouble their repair efforts, and forcing Lieutenant Worf, the massive Klingon Chief of Security, to offer his Captain a steady hand.

If Picard's bellow had no effect on the technicians, it certainly had one on everyone else; it was answered by a moment of intense and absolute silence. Then the babble resumed, this time with a poorly orchestrated chorus of explanation.

"Well, sir..."

"You see, sir..."

"It's like this, sir..."

"Captain, I..."

"Number One?" Picard glared at his First Officer, and the other voices died away.

"Your office, sir?" Commander William Ryker queried hopefully.

Frowning, the Captain glanced first at the offending youngster on his bridge -- who returned his look with one of sullen defiance -- then at two civilian visitors standing nervously nearby. "Counsellor Troi, if you would please take charge of our...guests?"

"Of course, Captain," Deanna Troi replied.

"Very well. Number One, ready room -- now."

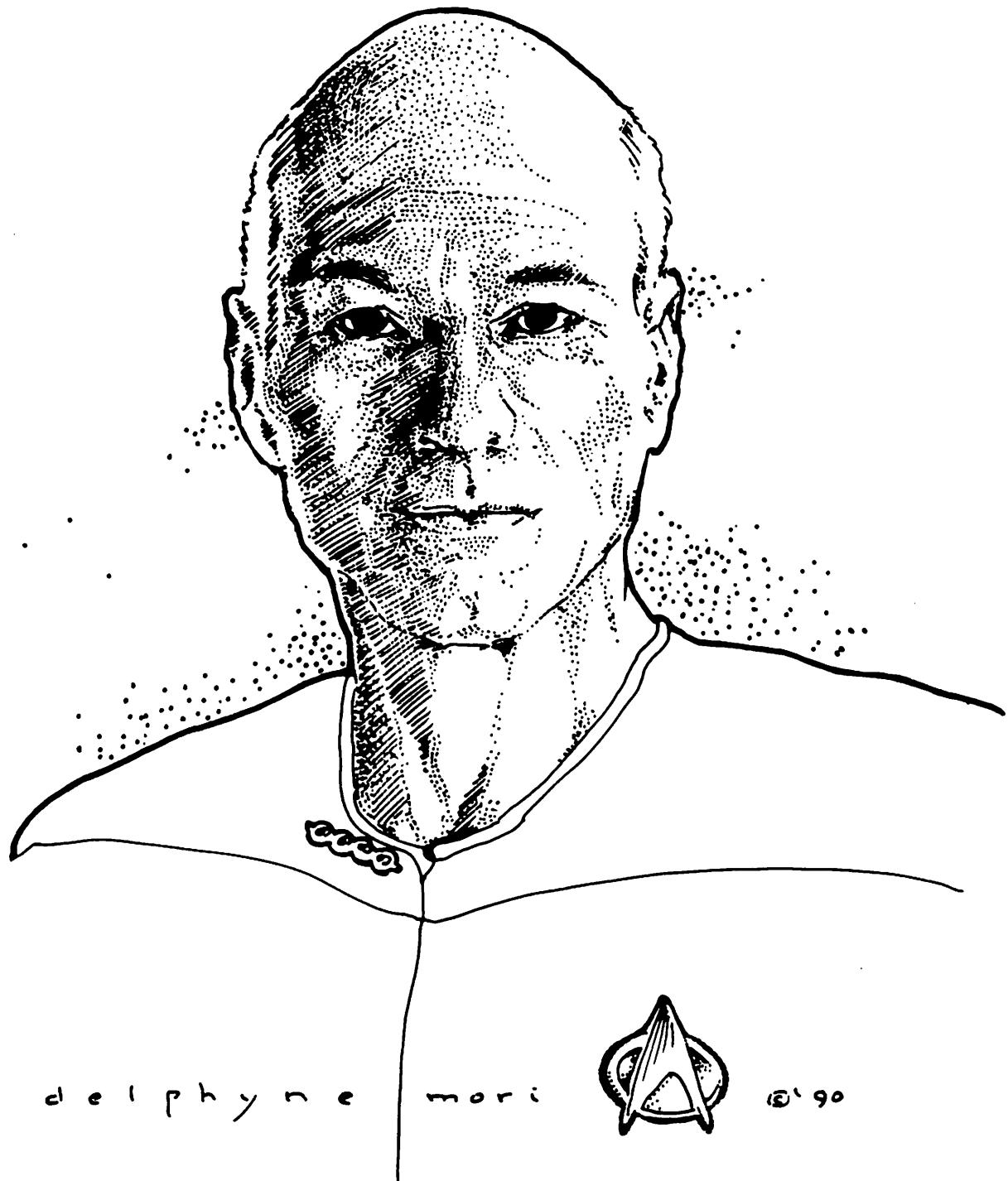
"Data, take over," Ryker ordered, doing his best to make a dignified exit. The ship shuddered again, and he failed miserably.

Picard sat silently behind his desk, one eyebrow raised expectantly, as the door slid shut behind his First Officer.

"Well, sir," Ryker began hesitantly, "the youngster was brought to the bridge for disciplinary action..."

"I see. And since when do bridge officers mete out punishment to adolescents?"

"This is an unusual case." The Commander swayed as the ship rocked violently once more.



Picard glowered. "What the devil is wrong with this ship? Can't Engineering...?"

"They're working on it. That's the problem, sir." He took a deep breath. "Our young friend managed to fuse a few circuits down in Engineering, and..."

"He what?"

"Nothing major, or so Geordi has assured me, sir. The ENTERPRISE just has a bad case of, uh, indigestion."

In spite of himself, the Captain's mouth twitched, his anger melting away in the face of his First Officer's absurd comparison. "Perhaps hiccups might be a more appropriate analogy," he observed, watching the other man grab for the back of a nearby chair. "Sit down before you fall down, Will. And kindly tell me what the devil that boy was doing down in Engineering."

"Field trip, sir," Ryker answered, gratefully sinking into a seat. "The children are routinely given tours of those parts of the ship relating to..."

"Yes, yes, I know. Aren't they supervised? How did a twelve-year-old...?"

"He's ten, actually."

"Hmph. Well, then, how did a ten-year-old gain access to the ship's circuitry at all, much less for the amount of time it must have taken to cause such...indigestion?" He winced as objects danced across his desk.

"That's harder to answer. According to his instructors, this particular youngster is quite a problem -- brilliant, an absolute genius with anything mechanical, intensely curious, and unfortunately, often without any consideration for the consequences of his actions. They seem to think he'll either set the engineering world on its ear when he grows up -- or he won't live to grow up."

The Captain paled. "Not another Wesley Crusher...?"

"It seems so, Captain."

"Heaven help us all..." He brightened suddenly. "Would you like me to talk to him?"

"If you would, sir. You have an idea?"

"Perhaps. Send the boy in here, then find me Mr. Crusher."

"You're not..." Ryker stopped, reconsidering. "Then again, maybe it's not such a bad idea. Wesley's young enough, and bright enough, to invent..."

"...and circumvent..."

"...almost anything our latest hellion might come up with."

"And he can use the supervisory experience. You might also have a word with Mr. LaForge about security, and with the boy's instructors on the advisability of closer supervision on future

field trips."

"It's already done, sir."

"Very good. Now, send the boy in. What's his name, anyway?"

"I'm afraid I didn't ask. Jimmy, I think."

As he waited, Captain Picard schooled his features to sternness. His relief at the relatively trivial nature of the problem must not show. At least the ENTERPRISE wasn't under attack, as he had first assumed from his ship's erratic behaviour. But the child definitely did need to be impressed with the seriousness of his crime...

There was a hesitant knock. "Come."

A brown-thatched head appeared, followed by a body propelled mostly by gentle prodding from Commander Ryker.

"Over there." Picard pointed to a spot directly in front of his desk, and the boy went to it nervously. Silence stretched uncomfortably as the commander of the ENTERPRISE studied his young visitor. "Well," he said at last, "so you're the one who tried to destroy my ship. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The boy's mouth fell open. "But I dinna try to destroy the ship!"

"Oh? Just what were you doing, then?"

"I just wanted to see..."

"And it didn't occur to you to ask questions instead of sneaking away and taking things apart -- things, I might add, that I am sure you were explicitly told not to touch?" The Captain glanced at his First Officer, who nodded affirmatively.

"But, sir..."

"Well?"

The boy edged closer, a faint Scottish burr colouring his speech as he tried to explain. "But, sir, we're never allowed to touch anything, to see anything. All we're taught is theory, and you need to see how things work to understand..." His voice trailed off as Picard's frown deepened.

"So," the Captain growled, "you don't care much for theory, do you? Well, there are times, young man, when theory must come before practical application -- or before experimentation. Suppose what you 'just wanted to see' involved our oxygen supply -- or worse, the anti-matter containment units. Your 'seeing' could easily have meant the death of every person aboard this vessel."

The boy blanched. He hadn't considered that possibility.

Picard leaned forward. "Since you have obviously not yet learned to think, I have decided you need a baby-sitter. One of my crew will supervise your recreational periods for as long as I deem necessary to the safe functioning of this ship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, what is your name?"

"Scott, sir," came the subdued reply. "James Montgomery Scott the Third."

Scott? The Captain's eyebrows shot up. Oh, my... "Any relation to...?"

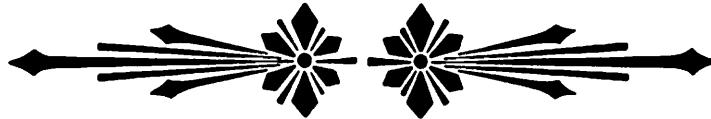
"Yes, sir!" He was justly proud of the relationship, and it showed.

"Very well, Mr. Scott. A crew member will visit your family this evening. Try to stay out of trouble until then. Dismissed."

"Your Instructors are waiting outside," Ryker added.

Captain and First Officer watched the retreating back until the door slid closed behind it. Picard looked nearly stunned, and sat speechless for a long moment.

"Number One," he confided at last, awe in every syllable, "we are in very big trouble!"



"Monologue"

(By Mary Robertson)

And so it comes -- the moment I foresaw
Upon a cliff-face time and time ago.
I told them then to hide nerves danger-rav
That circumstance would have me face Him so.

Lord Death is not my friend; I've fought too hard
Against his will to make him welcome here.
Though some might hail his passionless regard,
For such as I, his glance holds only fear.

I've cheated him too often, I would guess,
To hope for peace or mercy in return.
Perhaps it's fitting I feel Death's caress
While still the heat of battle makes me burn.

And now it comes, the end I've always known,
That summons me to die at last alone.

"The Big, Bad Wolfe"

(By Joyce Ashcroft)

Ten-year-old Matt squinted against the sun at the pony-tailed batter waiting for him at the plate. Tracey swung the bat with calculation, and she wasn't kidding around, either; she could hit it out of the yard on a regular basis, and he knew it -- girl or no girl. "I'm gonna put this one a hundred miles behind you!" the boy hollered to her.

"I'm gonna send it to Catalina!" she yelled back.

Matt had already gone into his wind-up when the sound of a jet plane flying overhead caught his attention and held it. He searched out the form of the jet against the clear sky -- there, just a black silhouette suspended in mid-air. No matter how many times he saw them, they were still impressive. He watched until it disappeared from view behind the house.

"Come on, Matt, throw the ball!" Tracey's voice broke into his daydream, and brought him back to the game.

"Pitch!" he corrected indignantly.

"Okay, pitch!" the girl mocked.

He wound up and pitched to her; her first swing was right on the money. She took off from home plate as the outfielders scurried after the fly ball. She rounded first base, and kept going.

The young social worker on the porch watching the kids play got to her feet and cheered as Tracey ran. "Take second!" she called, reaching down to fix the drooping ponytail of one of the younger girls. The sound of the jet had drawn her attention as well, but she'd watched with none of Matt's fascination. Every time she saw one of those planes, she was reminded of the flight she faced to keep this home, to make sure there would be a place to play baseball not only this year, but in the years to come.

Tracey rounded third base and started for home. One of the boys in the outfield finally got his hands on the ball, and threw it toward home plate. Tracey picked up speed, looking over her shoulder to determine whether she had a chance to make it all the way before being tagged out.

Not looking where she was going, she ran smack into the uniformed man without even seeing him. She fell to the ground, scraping her elbow, as the ball arrived at home plate and landed in the catcher's mitt just ten feet away.

Aggie Barrows was furious, and she came off the porch like a big league manager about to stridently argue a call. She only came up to the soldier's collarbone, but she pulled herself up to her full height and turned on the man. "You could have hurt her! What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

"None of you should still be here, Miss Barrows," the corporal told her bluntly.

"Where else are we supposed to go? This is the only home these kids know. How can you expect

them to just pack up and leave it?"

"This broken-down shack? In two weeks, no one'll know this place ever stood here. We'll have the new barracks up in a month." That was the plan, anyway. Where the Army was involved, God only knew how long it might actually take to have the new base up and functioning.

"Is that all you care about?"

"That's all my orders tell me to care about. And they include making sure you're all long gone before the bulldozers move in. You have until Friday, Miss Barrows. You know that."

Aggie glared up at the man, then helped Tracey to her feet. "You okay, honey?"

The girl nodded sullenly, trying not to cry. The pain in her scraped elbow and knees was nothing compared to the fact that she'd just lost her home run to this big bully who didn't even belong in their yard anyway. "Yeah."

"Okay, everybody get inside and clean up for dinner."

Matt spoke up. "But..."

"Go on, Matt. Make sure Tracey washes that cut and gets a band-aid on it."

Matt took Tracey's hand and started for the house. "I almost made it," the girl said angrily, casting a longing glance toward home plate -- which was actually the seat from a broken kitchen chair.

"You would have made it," her companion assured her. "We'll score it anyway. Interference."

She shook her head adamantly. "We can't do that. It's not in the rules."

"The New York Yankees don't have Army guys getting in the way when they run bases. They don't need it in their rules."

The group of kids made their way into the house, leaving Aggie and the soldier alone. Aggie waited until all the kids were out of earshot before turning to the man again. "Why?"

"Lady, I don't ask a four-star general 'why' anything. I just follow orders. Either you leave the easy way, or we'll have to escort you off these premises."

"I don't follow anybody's orders!" She turned on her heel and marched toward the front porch.

"Friday, Miss Barrows," the corporal reminded her.

"This isn't over yet!" she snapped.

Once the door was firmly closed between her and the outside world, Aggie's tough facade began to crack. She leaned heavily against the door and closed her eyes, trying to check the tears before they could start. A light tug on her pants leg made her look down. Sean, four years old, had his big eyes on her. "Don't cry." Sage preschool advice.

She smiled, and tousled his hair. "I'm okay, Sean, thanks." The other kids were nearby, in a

frightened huddle. "Didn't I ask you all to get cleaned up?"

"Are we gonna have to leave?" Matt wanted to know.

"Not if I have anything to say about it. Just go get washed up now, okay? Help the little ones reach the sink."

Matt took Sean's hand, Tracey took the hands of two of the smaller children, and they all started upstairs. Aggie forced a smile for their benefit, but once they were out of sight, she allowed her face to fall and looked around at the peeling paint and worn furniture of the entryway. Then she looked after the kids. They were in hot water this time.

It always had been too much for her, really, all by herself with fourteen little ones. The house was a wreck; it was probably technically unsafe, and the kids might well be better off in a regular children's shelter in Los Angeles.

But she loved them. That was, when you got right down to it, the only thing that kept her from letting the damned Army have the drafty old place. She simply couldn't stand the thought of breaking up what she had come to think of as her extended family. She had to fight it -- fight until nothing was standing anymore. She was a Barrows, and that was what she had to do.

In the upstairs bathroom, Matt washed Sean's face while Tracey helped a younger girl reach the sink to wash her hands. While the youngster dried them, Tracey inspected the cuts on her elbow and knees.

"Aggie said to get a band-aid," Matt reminded her.

"I don't need one."

"Do you think we'll have to leave here?"

"I don't know." Tracey lifted the small girl off the step-stool, and Matt dried Sean's face. "I wish we could find somebody who could help us."

* * * * *

B.A. Baracus was many things to many people. To kids, he was a big brother. B.A.'s idea of a great day was to shoot a few baskets with the neighbourhood crowd; at the moment, he was having a great day. He passed the ball to one of the boys, who caught it and ran toward the net, dribbling like one of the Lakers. He stopped and shot for the hoop. The ball sailed over the heads of the opposing team; the point was made. The winning team cheered, and the losers congratulated the winners.

"That's the way to be, little brothers," B.A. said approvingly. "Nobody likes a bad sport. This way, everybody's a winner." He caught sight of Tracey, who was standing alone on the sidelines. "Hey, Tracey, get over here. We're gonna put you on McAllister's team so they can win one."

She went toward him, unsmiling. "Hi, B.A."

"Hey, what's the problem?" The big man crouched down to be at her eye level.

"Big problem, B.A. Real big."

"Well, tell me about it. Maybe I can help."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. I don't know if anyone can."

He smiled, and took her hand. "You'd be surprised. Why don't you give me a try?"

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, two others joined B.A. and Tracey on the court -- Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith and Lieutenant Templeton "Faceman" Peck. Together, the three men were three-quarters of the infamous A-Team -- quite possibly all the help anyone could ever need. B.A. had summoned Hannibal and Face -- not an unheard-of situation, since the team would often congregate for the benefit of one of its members. But this was the first time the alarm had gone out for an eleven-year-old girl. Okay, size wasn't everything -- but it was something.

"So the Army's taken to knocking down old buildings when they need a little elbow room, is that it?" Hannibal puffed on one of his trademark cigars, directing the question to B.A.

"From the sound of the place, I kind of doubt many people would miss it," Face remarked.

"The kids would miss it, man. It's the only home most of 'em can remember."

Hannibal nodded. "This Aggie Barrows, she's the one in charge?"

"Aggie takes care of us," Tracey replied.

"A rundown old building with one social worker in charge?" Face asked. "The Army must have made provisions for relocating the kids."

"But we want to stay together," the girl said firmly. "And nobody wants fourteen kids."

"I see her point," Hannibal was forced to agree.

"We thought, maybe if we could fix up the house, they might decide not to tear it down," the girl went on. "But it's so much work, and Aggie can't afford to hire anybody to do it."

"We gotta do somethin', Hannibal," B.A. insisted. "We can't let the Army run this lady and these kids outta their home."

"You're suggesting we rebuild their house?" The second the words were out of his mouth, Face regretted them. The answer was all too obvious, even before B.A. nodded. "Oh, terrific! We might want to hang out a sign -- 'A-Team Construction Company, Plumbing and Wiring Our Speciality'."

"You surprise me, Face," Hannibal remarked. "I thought you, of all people..."

"Don't get started, Colonel."

"Started? Me?"

"That's right -- and don't do it! I know exactly what you're thinking."

"You do?"

"Yeah, you're thinking that I'm an easy sale on this job because I know what it's like to grow up in an orphanage."

"What is it like?"

Too late, Face realized he'd played right into Hannibal's trap. His childhood was something he thought about as little as possible; but sometimes, just the right sequence of events or the right phrase or some other memory took him back in time, usually when he didn't really want to go, and he found himself thinking about it in spite of himself.

Talking about it was out of the question. "All right, all right," he mumbled.

B.A. smiled at Tracey. "It's gonna be all right, kid. You got all the help you need right here."

She beamed at the three men. "Thanks, B.A. Aggie's gonna be so surprised!"

Face nodded. "Probably."

"Let's go get Murdock and introduce ourselves to Miss Barrows," Hannibal suggested.

That took the smile off B.A.'s face. "Oh, man..."

"Now, B.A., Murdock performs a vital function in the workings of this team. Without Murdock, we'd be cooking without seasonings, colouring without crayons..."

"Sailing the TITANIC without icebergs," Face suggested.

Hannibal grinned around his cigar. "Exactly!"

* * * * *

In the compound generally known as the Los Angeles Veterans' Hospital, one patient generally known as Captain "Howling Mad" Murdock sat by himself under a tree, reading a worn paperback book, his right hand gently moving back and forth about six inches above the ground. If there had been a small dog there, his hand would have been petting it. There was no dog.

Unfortunately, Murdock saw one anyway.

A sudden harsh whisper from the cover of a nearby rhododendron startled him. "Murdock!"

He looked up briefly. Seeing nothing, he returned to his book and his vaporous dog.

The voice spoke again, a little louder. "Murdock!"

He looked around again. He still saw no one, but before he could return to his book, the rhododendron shook slightly.

Murdock reached out curiously and touched a branch. His hand was slapped, and he pulled back sharply. "Will you watch your hands?"

The voice belonged to Face, then, no question about it -- particularly when he appeared out of the bush, plucking burrs from his sportcoat. "Oscar de la Renta meets Euell Gibbons..." he grumbled.

Murdock burst out laughing, and Face shushed him quickly. "You want to keep it down? In case you've forgotten, they're not supposed to know I'm here."

"Man, you better be careful. Some crazy vegetarian's gonna stick you in the Cuisinart and make a high-protein drink outta you."

"Very funny. Now, if you're finished, would you care to accompany me to the van?"

Murdock turned indignant eyes on Face and stroked his invisible companion more rapidly. "You would presume to invite Little Orphan Murdock along without including his trusty sidekick and constant companion? I'm surprised at you, Face. Now, ask Sandy if he still feels like comin' along after you've slighted him this way."

Face cast his eyes skyward. "B.A., you're really gonna hate this one."

Murdock scooped up his imaginary dog and let the other man lead the way. But before following, he made "eye contact" with his "animal." "Leapin' lizards!" he emoted. Then he smiled, satisfied with the way the new personality was working out, and went after Face.

* * * * *

The orphanage was about what the team had expected -- a rundown old building with a rundown old yard. The only thing that wasn't rundown, Face was glad to notice, was Aggie Barrows. Even the way she was, firm and insistent and, yes, angry as hell, he found her very attractive, and he had a hard time keeping that attraction under control.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, but I can't accept it," she was saying, her arms folded and her mind apparently made up beyond any hope of persuasion.

Matt, Tracey, and some of the other kids peeked into the living room from their hiding spot around the corner in the kitchen. Things -- which had been looking up -- were now looking down. Aggie didn't seem inclined to accept the help the four men offered, and the kids couldn't imagine why not.

"I appreciate your point, Miss Barrows," Hannibal said. "But, according to Tracey, you and the children are about to be evicted from this house and split up to different homes. We think we can prevent that."

She shook her head. "I know who you are. You've all been on the run from the Army for years. It just isn't right to have you here. I have to think about the children. If the military found you here, we'd all be in trouble."

"Oh, but that's half the fun," Face informed her, in an attempt to take the chill off.

It didn't work. "I think you'd better go," she told them. "I'm sorry Tracey involved you in this."

"What chance do you have of keeping the kids together?" Hannibal asked.

"I don't know. But that's my responsibility."

The Colonel nodded, and got to his feet. "I understand. Sorry we couldn't help out."

Tracey couldn't keep quiet any longer. She ran into the room, followed closely by Matt and some of the other kids. She went straight to B.A. "You can't go!"

"We gotta go by the rules, honey," the big man explained. "In this house, Aggie makes the rules."

"But we need your help!"

Aggie put an arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry Tracey, but we can't accept their help. We have to do this for ourselves."

"Well, we certainly wish you luck," Hannibal told her.

"And we'll certainly need it. Thank you for coming, Mr. Smith. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

The Colonel went to the door, the other men on his heels. Aggie let them out, then stood at a window with Tracey and watched them get into their van and drive away.

"But why?"

There was no good answer to Tracey's question. An eleven-year-old couldn't be expected to understand the subtleties of the situation; all the child knew was that B.A. was her friend, and Aggie didn't want to discourage that friendship. She herself had no doubt they were good people -- but she didn't want to have to explain to Tracey that her friend B.A. had been on the run from the United States Army since before the girl was born. "I really can't explain it. I'm sorry. You just have to trust me."

As the van pulled away, Murdock's attention was on the still-invisible Sandy; Face's attention was on the very-visible Aggie Barrows. "She sure doesn't look like somebody named Aggie," he mused to himself.

"She's a good lady," B.A. said. "She's just doin' what she gotta do. Man, I hope things turn out okay for them."

Murdock had discovered an absorbing way to spend the drive time -- teaching Sandy to do a trick. "Come on, boy, roll over!" he prompted. "That's it -- roll over!"

"Murdock, you got another of your invisible animals in my van?" B.A. roared.

"Do you see any invisible animals in your van?" the Captain countered.

The big man took a quick look over his shoulder, and even appeared satisfied for a couple of seconds. Then he realized with a red rush of anger that Murdock had done it to him again. Furious, he turned back to the road, fingers clenched on the steering wheel. "I'm warnin' you, Murdock!" he said gruffly.

Face raised a tentative hand. "Oh, B.A., I forgot to tell you. He's Little Orphan Murdock, and he's got his dog Sandy with him."

Murdock finally succeeded in getting Sandy to roll over as bidden. "Leapin' lizards!" he exclaimed jubilantly.

"I'm gonna leap all over your face if you don't shut up!" B.A. bellowed.

Murdock clutched Sandy protectively against his jacket and sat back quietly in his seat. Face shook his head. "It's gonna be one of those real long days..."

* * * * *

After lunch, Aggie and the children congregated on the front porch with a hammer and a can of nails -- an almost ridiculous gesture, considering the general condition of the building; but Aggie knew full well that if you didn't decide on a spot to begin something, you never did get it finished. She pounded one of the nails into the top step as Sean held out another. "Here, Aggie."

"Thanks, partner." She took the next nail, and began to pound it into the rickety step.

She and the kids were too intent on the job at hand to notice the car that pulled up in the driveway; but had she seen the occupants, she would have recognized them easily. Tony Wolfe was in the lead -- the circumference of his muscular shoulders was approximately equal to his I.Q., and his two companions were similarly equipped.

When Aggie did look up to see them heading across the lawn toward them, she hurriedly motioned the kids to go back inside. With some hesitation, they all complied except Matt, who stood beside her as the newcomers approached.

Wolfe looked at the nail Aggie had pounded halfway in. Before she could finish the job, he kicked it with the steel toe of his boot, bending it so badly as to render it useless.

Aggie glared at him, her eyes full of anger. "If you think that's going to stop me, you've got another thought coming."

"If you think that's all we're prepared to do to stop you, so do you."

"Look..."

"No, you look. The Army hired me to level this place, lady, and that's exactly what I'm gonna do. I don't care how many nails you drive into these steps. This house has been condemned, and I'm gonna do my job. My advice to you is to get these kids and get out of here -- before somebody gets hurt."

The implication in his last words wasn't lost on Aggie. "Your threats don't scare me, Wolfe."

"They should." He kicked the can of nails off the porch.

Matt stepped forward angrily. "You stop that right now!"

The man on Wolfe's right, Dan, pointed an amused finger at the boy. "Get a load of the midget."

Matt grabbed the hammer out of Aggie's hand and hit Dan in the ankle with it; even through his heavy boots, the man felt it. He reached for the boy, and when Aggie intervened before he could grab him, he held onto her instead, and shook her roughly. "You oughta teach these kids not to do stupid things."

"I would have done it myself," she snapped.

The man slapped her face; she flinched, but didn't cry out. She stared at him defiantly, and he raised his hand again.

Wolfe stepped in. "That's enough." He removed Dan's hand from Aggie, who backed up toward the front door, her hand firmly on Matt's shoulder. "We'll be back. And when we get here, you'd better be gone. You got till tomorrow. Then you find out how rough we can play."

He motioned for his companions to follow him, and the three of them got back into their car and drove off.

"Come on, let's go inside," Aggie said softly.

From an upstairs bedroom window, Tracey had seen the whole thing. It had been hard to sit and watch, but something told her that being a witness might be important later on. She knew how important it was to tell somebody about what had just gone on, and she knew just the person to tell.

That night, while the rest of the children were asleep, she crept out of bed and pulled on her sneakers. She raised the window and climbed out, reaching with the confidence of a child who doesn't recognize the danger; she grabbed a branch and swung herself onto the tree limb. She moved with a precision that showed this wasn't the first time she'd made such an exit, climbing all the way down the tree before jumping to the ground from a low branch. Once on the lawn, she took off as fast as she could, running by the light of the moon across the cluttered grass, past the sign that read, "Future Site of Harris Air Force Base."

* * * * *

Aggie was surprised to find the A-Team at her front door again the next day, and even more surprised to find out about Tracey's nocturnal walk, which she promised the girl they'd discuss in more detail later on. But she was in a slightly different frame of mind than on the previous day -- the bruise on her face where Dan had hit her was still swollen, in spite of the ice she'd used -- and she wasn't altogether sorry to see them again. "I guess I underestimated them," she admitted quietly; talking hurt more than she wanted to admit. "They've never been violent before."

"Could be they just realized you were more determined to stay here than they thought," Hannibal theorized. "They noticed you were trying to fix the place up, and it set them off."

"I got the top step fixed, Mr. Smith. The rest of the stairs still lean west, and the roof still leans east."

Face arrived from the kitchen with some more ice cubes wrapped in a kitchen towel, and put the bundle into Aggie's hand. When she looked at him quizzically, he gestured to her cheek. She acquiesced, and held the ice pack against the bruise.

The Lieutenant smiled at her. Even when he was at work, he was at work. "It's not like the Army to use that kind of pressure. I'm no big fan of the military in general, but they don't normally go around hitting defenseless social workers."

"They're private contractors. They've got a lucrative deal with the Army, and they want to keep it. Wolfe's not going to let anybody stop him."

"Well, we usually don't go in heavily for construction work -- but we usually don't let slime-balls like Wolfe slap around pretty ladies, either."

Aggie thought for a moment. "If you're still willing to help us..."

"We're here," Hannibal told her.

"In that case, gentlemen..." She managed a small smile in spite of the pain. "...make yourselves at home."

At home... Face once again found himself experiencing one of those moments he'd really rather not. The house wasn't so very different from the one in which he'd grown up, when you stopped to think about it. There'd never been enough money there, either, and although it had been run by the Church and had never been in danger of getting flattened for the benefit of a new airport, a lot of the feeling of the place was the same. It was sort of...

He pulled himself out of his reverie to find Aggie looking at him with curiosity and some understanding in her eyes. He realized he'd been quiet too long, and quickly tried to pretend there was nothing out of the ordinary. It almost worked, too -- but the woman was sharper than that, and he knew he hadn't totally fogged her. "Sorry..." he said quickly, pulling himself back together.

B.A. drew some of the unwanted attention from him. "That guy better not try anything again. He don't wanna find out what we do to fools who hit ladies."

Murdock nodded eagerly. "Sandy and I are right behind you, B.A."

The big man scowled at him as he nodded for good measure and took a doggie treat out of his jacket pocket. He held it out, and took several jabs at empty air in an effort to find Sandy's mouth -- much to the delight of the younger kids, who had taken no time at all to latch onto the concept of an invisible dog; they were having a great time with the game.

B.A. grabbed the dog biscuit and shoved it into Murdock's mouth. "Be quiet, fool." The Captain glowered briefly, then discovered much to his surprise that dog biscuits didn't taste all that bad.

"Miss Barrows, you just hired the A-Team," Hannibal announced.

Aggie nodded halfheartedly. "Now, the only problem is that I don't know how we're going to pay you. Most of what we've managed to save, we've used toward fixing the house."

"This job is personal," the Colonel assured her. "Taking things away from the Army is a hobby of ours, you might say."

"In other words," Face clarified, "you've just borrowed the A-Team."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank us yet. You haven't even seen us pound a nail."

"Oh, you look pretty capable to me."

Their eyes met, and they shared a smile. Not much of a score for Face, not measured the usual way, but he felt remarkably good about it. Hannibal interrupted the moment. "And if our procurement officer would be so kind as to sharpen his pencil, I'll give him a list of the material we'll need to get started."

Face hurriedly drew a pencil and small notebook from his coat pocket. "Shoot."

"Where are you going to get all this stuff?" Aggie queried. "It costs money, you know."

"What's the name of the guy who showed up here and roughed you up?" Hannibal asked.

"Anthony Wolfe, but..."

Face made a note of the name. "Do you happen to have his address? Well, never mind, we'll let our fingers do the walking."

"Are you out of your minds? You can't just walk in there and..."

Hannibal grinned. "Of course we can. We'll need lumber, drills, drill bits..."

Face made the appropriate notes. "Any particular size?"

"A nice assortment."

"You guys are too much," Aggie said.

"We do our best. A power saw, some standard pipe fittings..."

Face took it all down, keeping one eye on Aggie. She returned the look with one of her own. Murdock and B.A. exchanged a look of their own, a wordless one, accompanied by the slow shaking of their heads.

* * * * *

The Wolfe Construction Company sat on some prime Los Angeles real estate near downtown. The proprietor, Anthony Wolfe, was in the midst of a conference with two of his most trusted "vice presidents," Dan and Calvin. It seemed many of these recent conferences had broken up with extreme dissatisfaction on all sides. It also seemed they were headed for another one of those situations. "I hope I won't have to go out there again myself," Wolfe said sharply. "I hope I'll be able to count on the two of you to get this done right for me."

"She's actually tryin' to fix up that eyesore." Dan's scornful attitude was partially attributable to the pain in his ankle, where it had been rudely introduced to Matt's hammer.

"Man, she shouldn't even be here. She and those kids should have been history as of two days ago!"

"We warned her, we threatened her."

"A military contract means a lot of money, Calvin! You gonna let a girl and a bunch of little kids stop you? She don't budge, you get tough with her, you read me?"

"Yeah."

Wolfe turned to Dan. "You got that, too?"

"Yeah, right, right. Don't worry about it."

"I worry. I worry when you guys can't even get Mary Pickford and two dozen brats out of your way. Makes me think I made a mistake hiring you. And it's gonna make the Army wonder if they made a mistake with me."

"We'll take care of it."

"You'd better. I told the colonel that building was as good as down. I'd hate to have to tell him you screwed up."

He stared both men down, getting Calvin to look away without too much trouble. Dan was only marginally more self-confident. Just then, the door to the inner office opened, and Face entered -- decked out in full Army regalia. He offered a crisp salute to Wolfe and his companions.

"Who are you?" Wolfe demanded. "And how the hell did you get in here?"

"Lieutenant Harrison Crandall," Face replied -- straight-faced. He paused to give them the full effect. "Mr. Anthony Wolfe?"

He stepped forward. "Yeah, that's me. What can I do for you?"

Face suddenly adopted his best panicked expression. He'd practiced it on the way over. "You mean it's not ready?"

"What's not ready?"

The Lieutenant's composure shattered completely; they could almost hear it hit the floor. "Oh, no! Tell me you're kidding! Right? Tell me you're... Oh, you don't understand, fellas! I'm the one who's gonna have to answer for this if it's not done in time! Come on!"

Wolfe wasn't used to having complete strangers walk in and have nervous breakdowns in his office; it began to irritate him a little. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you trying to get me thrown in the stockade? Don't pretend you didn't know you had to have the stuff ready by noon!"

"What stuff?"

"The first load of building supplies that was supposed to go over to the site of the new airfield

this morning! Oh, man, the general's supposed to have his picture taken with the mayor at the ground-breaking ceremony at two o'clock! He's waiting in the car! What am I supposed to tell him?"

"Nobody told me about no ground-breaking," Wolfe insisted.

"Oh, sure, easy for you to say. You're not staring ten years in Leavenworth in the face! You gotta help me out! We gotta get those supplies together so I can get them over to the site and the general can have his picture taken... He just hates to be kept waiting!"

Calvin turned to Wolfe as Face continued to come apart. "How can they have a ground-breaking when we ain't even knocked the old building down yet?"

That did it. Face clutched at his chest and gasped in horror. "Oh, no!"

Wolfe hushed Calvin with a glance. "Lieutenant, uh, nobody told us anything about a ceremony this afternoon."

He was cut off when Murdock appeared in the doorway, in the garb of an Army general. It was one of his better poses. He brought with him a riding crop and a steely-eyed glare worthy of a drill sergeant. Face sprang to attention. "General Leighton, sir!"

Murdock curled his lip. "I'm waiting, Lieutenant." He returned the salute.

"Yes, sir, I, uh..."

"I don't like to be kept waiting, Lieutenant."

"No, sir, uh..."

Murdock strutted over to Wolfe and narrowed his eyes. "Am I to assume that the reason I am kept waiting is that Mr. Wolfe does not have our materials ready?"

Wolfe figured he'd better jump in -- fast. "General, I was never notified that..."

"I see."

The contractor relaxed visibly, and leaned against his desk. "You see, we..."

The riding crop lashed out against the edge of the desk, narrowly missing Wolfe's fingers; the man pulled back sharply. Murdock raised his voice a few decibels to begin his tirade. "You were never notified? You require an engraved invitation to have my materials ready?"

"S..sir," Wolfe stammered, "we..."

"This is a very poor excuse for a business!"

"I'm sorry, General, but..."

Murdock continued his monologue in a slightly more subdued tone. "It wasn't always like this. In the old days, all a general had to do was mention a court martial, and the suppliers always had everything in plenty of time. All right, so a Phillips screwdriver cost fourteen hundred

dollars, but at least things got done. Today, you pay a dollar for the screwdriver, but you lose six million in overtime and union dues. I told them not to go to outside suppliers. I told them... Did they listen? Where is the justice? Where is the honour? Where is the patriotism?" He slammed the riding crop against the desk again, and jacked up his own volume. "Where is my lumber?"

Wolfe turned quickly to Calvin. "Get out back, and make sure the general gets everything he needs -- on the double."

"Yeah," Calvin nodded. "Yeah, you got it."

He fumbled a salute to Murdock, who returned it with a contemptuous glare, and exited the back door into the lumber yard. "We'll have it for you right away, General," Wolfe assured him.

The "general" ignored him and turned to Face, giving him a look that faded his self-satisfied smile immediately. "I'd have you peeling potatoes for the rest of your commission if you weren't married to my sister."

Face raised his eyebrows -- this wasn't in the script. "Yes, sir."

Disgusted, Murdock turned away.

The scam worked like a charm, even the ad-libbed parts. Face opened the car door for Murdock, who got into the back seat; then the Lieutenant got in front and started the car. As soon as it was in drive, he glanced back over his shoulder. "Married to your sister?"

"How else was I gonna explain a big-shot general havin' such a flaky aide? We don't grow on trees, you know." He buffed the insignia on his uniform.

"Grow on them, no."

Murdock raised a suspicious eyebrow as Face pulled the car out of the parking lot. The Lieutenant grinned. "By the time we get back to Aggie's, I'd be willing to bet there'll be some goodies waiting for us... 'General'."

He was absolutely right. When they pulled into Aggie's rutted driveway, the first thing they noticed was the truck in front of the house, loaded with lumber and crates of equipment bearing the name of the Wolfe Construction Company.

As soon as Face stopped the car, Murdock scrambled over the seat and exited in typical fashion through the front passenger door. The Lieutenant followed at a more sedate pace to where Hannibal was making a cursory inspection of the truck's contents.

"Congratulations, guys," he greeted the two "officers." "This arrived about fifteen minutes ago."

"Don't thank me," Face told him, gesturing to Murdock. "Thank Patton over there. So now what, Colonel? Does that gleam in your eye that I don't like mean that we have to...?"

"That's right. We have to use 'em."

The Lieutenant looked down at his neatly pressed slacks and winced. "I don't suppose there are

any openings for foremen, are there?"

Aggie ran up to them and hugged Face -- a very pleasant surprise that made what they had just been through entirely worth it. "You did it!" she bubbled. "I can't believe you did it! How did you get Wolfe to just hand all this stuff over to you?"

The con man assumed an air of nonchalance. "I have a certain flair for persuasion, that's all."

Hannibal nodded. "That's right. And now, Face, it's time for you to develop your talents in a more concrete area."

From the back of the truck, B.A. tossed a bag of cement that landed at the Lieutenant's feet. Face regarded it as though it might be dangerous. "But I've never... I don't know how..." he stammered.

Murdock smirked. "Read the bag, Flair."

Face rolled up his sleeves and turned the bag over. "But..." When he looked up to see Aggie still watching him, he managed to smile at her and appear to be getting into the hard work. As soon as she glanced away, however, he lost his stiff upper lip, and his shoulders slumped in despair.

Nobody could complain that they didn't have enough hands to do the job. The kids were all eager and willing to help, and found ways to make themselves useful -- holding cans of nails, sweeping up wood shavings, carrying tool boxes. The four men worked all over the house, making necessary repairs inside and out, only occasionally making any kind of mistake.

Usually, such mistakes involved Face not paying attention to what he was doing -- such as being so intent on putting on the macho act for Aggie that he didn't notice he was rehanging the living room door on Murdock's fingers. But such episodes were thankfully few and far between. Spirits were high, and it began to look like they might actually be able to pull it off.

* * * * *

Spirits were not so high at Wolfe Construction. Dan and Calvin had been very interested in the goings-on at the old house, and had paid a lot of clandestine attention to the progress the team was making. Unfortunately, once they found out about it, they had to report it. That was the tough part.

Wolfe had been enraged before, but this latest news just about put him over the decibel level set by Murdock as The Angry General. "She what?"

"S...she..." Calvin stammered to a halt, and tried again. "It looks like she's havin' the old place fixed up. There's new paint outside, and the broken glass is all fixed..."

"Calvin, it don't sound too much like you're describing a condemned building to me. You guys were supposed to have them out of there by now!"

"She's got some guys helpin' her."

"I don't care if she's got the Pittsburgh Steelers helpin' her! I want that place torn down! And I don't care how you do it. Just get it done!"



"But..."

"You heard me. Get it done!"

"Yeah," Dan nodded. "Sure."

"Tonight!"

* * * * *

B.A. and Murdock carried a two-by-four through the front door while Aggie held it open for them. As she let it close, she looked down the long driveway.

A car approached, and as it drew closer, she could see the insignia on the door -- a military vehicle. She glanced furtively toward the house, but the car was too close; there was no time to warn the team without the occupants of the vehicle becoming suspicious.

Colonel Decker and Captain Crane got out of the sedan and approached the porch. They took some cursory looks at the marked improvements on the house's exterior before heading toward Aggie. Decker touched the brim of his cap cordially, but the woman offered him only a cold, silent stare.

"Miss Barrows, I'm Colonel Decker."

"Colonel."

"Seems as though you've done some work on the old place since a few days ago."

"And if we have?"

"You've been told you have to leave."

"This is my home."

"This is government property."

"It's my home, and I intend to stay. And I intend to insist."

"We're prepared to insist as well."

Aggie bristled. "With what, your tanks and machine guns? Don't you think the Army's had enough bad press without your using fire-power to frighten off fourteen scared children?"

Negotiation had once been Decker's long suit, in battle days -- but he was totally unprepared to negotiate with a young woman in shorts over a house whose ownership was, to him, utterly undebatable. "With your permission, then," he said, "I would like to inspect the premises."

She gestured toward the grounds -- no kids in sight and, what was more important, no A-Team. "Be my guest."

The Colonel, however, had his own ideas, and started into the house. Aggie started to step in

front of him, but he moved past her and went inside. Captain Crane followed him into the foyer, with Aggie trailing helplessly behind them, frantically looking around for any sign of the fugitives.

The wallpaper had been redone, the holes in the plaster patched, the broken glass in the front windows replaced. Decker tested the fresh paint on the door frame and found it still tacky. "Quite a job you've done in so short a time," he remarked.

"I take vitamins."

The sound of sawing came from the living room, and the Colonel turned toward it. Aggie tensed visibly and followed him, hoping against hope that what she feared they would find wasn't actually there.

Hannibal Smith, unrecognizable in the heavily made-up guise of an old man, sawed away at the two-by-four lying across two saw-horses. His motions were the slow, awkward ones of an aged carpenter; as always, he was precisely in character.

When Aggie and the two military men entered the room, he straightened slowly and met Decker's gaze head-on. The social worker rushed in just behind Crane, unable to see Hannibal from where she stood. "I can explain everything," she began, then broke off when she noticed the disguise. Unsure how to proceed, she stopped talking altogether and stood in silence.

"Of course you can, Agnes," the "old man" finished for her, his voice thick with a back-country accent. "Now, you mind tellin' me who these two gentlemen are? If they're friends of yours, you just show 'em out back and give 'em some hammers. I'll be ready to get this support up in two shakes."

The idea did not appeal to Decker at all. But before he could decline the invitation to pitch in, Hannibal stepped forward past the tongue-tied Aggie and offered his hand. "Nice girl, my Agnes, but a bit short on formalities. Name's Barrows." He withdrew his hand when the Colonel only stared at it.

"Mr. Barrows, are you aware that this property has been condemned?"

"Well, now, it sure don't seem all that bad to me. Give me a little time, a little good, old-fashioned elbow grease, and I'll have the place ship-shape in no time." This is fun!

Decker tried another angle. "This property belongs to the United States Army, and Miss Agnes Barrows has been served duly notarized papers to evacuate these premises as of 0800 hours tomorrow. Failure to comply with these orders will result in prosecution in Federal Court."

Hannibal nudged Aggie gently; when she turned numbly to look at him, he winked reassuringly. "I got it now -- that old DRAGNET show. Fella here reminds me of that Joe Sunday."

"You don't seem to understand the situation, Mr. Barrows," Decker went on. "If you do not leave these premises by eight o'clock tomorrow morning, you will be held in contempt of the United States Army."

The leader of the A-Team stood straighter and held his saw like a Marine bayonet. "Sir, I'll have you know that you're talkin' to a veteran of the Second World War, a man who was decorated for outstanding service to his country, who fought for freedom on foreign soil. I am also the

owner of a Chevrolet and season tickets to the Dodgers' home games. I have nothin' but the greatest respect for the United States Army." And if that performance doesn't deserve an Academy Award, I'll eat this clapboard!

"You are required by law to leave this house by morning," Decker reiterated.

"But the Army ain't gonna get our house," Hannibal said firmly.

"But..." It was the first thing Aggie had been able to squeeze out of her constricted throat. Hannibal put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a chummy shake.

"Now, Agnes, don't you argue with your old pop. He knows what he's doin'."

Colonel Decker set his jaw. "Eight o'clock, Mr. Barrows. Please don't make it necessary for us to use force."

"Don't let the door whack you on the way out -- spring needs adjustin'." Hannibal grinned slyly at the other man and then at Aggie, who managed a faint, confused smile in return. Decker and Crane exited the living room, and when the sound of the front door closing reached them, both Hannibal and Aggie relaxed considerably.

"I don't know how you did it," the woman said.

"Sometimes, I surprise myself."

B.A., Face, and Murdock came in from the next room. "Man, I thought that sucker had us but good," B.A. said. "What's Decker doin' here?"

"What better bearer of bad news to women and children?" Hannibal asked. "He's got the right personality for orphanage evictions. Probably doesn't let it keep him awake nights, either."

"So what now, Colonel? Wait around for his next unannounced visit?"

"He announced it perfectly, Face. At eight o'clock in the morning, he'll be back with the eighth armoured division..." He bent to pick up Sean, who had wandered into the room. "...to tear-gas these dangerous felons out of here. We're in the clear until then."

"And then?"

That look again -- the look that told Face a plan was brewing. "Then the real fun begins."

"I hate the way you put that."

Murdock stepped forward to insert his two cents. "Don't worry, Face. Sandy may look like a harmless little puppy dog, but underneath this innocent exterior there beats the heart of a lion, there runs the blood of a tiger..."

"And right beside him stands the fool of the century," B.A. finished.

Hannibal put an arm around Face's shoulders. "It's gonna be okay, Face. I have a plan."

He cringed melodramatically. "Oh, no! A plan..."

Fortunately for Face, Hannibal's latest plan involved nothing more immediately trying for him personally than requiring him to spend the night at the orphanage, "just in case" of any unanticipated trouble. The Lieutenant had no trouble accepting the assignment. The looks he and Aggie had been exchanging were becoming more and more frequent and involved, and he had just about decided the Colonel had a heart after all. This was his kind of mission.

He hadn't, however, counted on the limited romantic possibilities of a house with fourteen children in it. After dinner and fourteen baths, getting fourteen kids into pyjamas and fourteen sets of teeth brushed, he realized he hadn't been so completely exhausted since pulling three months of duty in 'Nam. Aggie found him lying prone on the living room couch after she'd sent the last child upstairs to wait for their good-night kisses. "So," she said brightly. "This is how the other half lives."

"It's a lot easier being on the run from the Army," he told her wearily. "God, I feel old."

"I feel safe," she replied, glancing out the front window. "For the first time in a long time, too. I guess I'd better not get too used to it."

"Come on, now. Look at the bright side. You don't even need us. All you have to do is turn these kids on the Army, and they'll be waving the old white flag in no time."

"The kids've been great. They're so resilient... They seem able to bounce back from anything."

"They've got a lot of help. You've been real good for them. That's important to kids in their situation."

Aggie sat down on the couch; it was a struggle, but Face managed to sit up and join her. "You sound like you know it," she observed.

"No. I mean, well, yeah, but not..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot or anything. I couldn't help noticing that you... Well, like the other day I said something, and you..."

"You said, 'Make yourself at home,'" he reminded her. "And you're a very perceptive lady, in addition to being beautiful. But..."

"Well, so I was wrong, I guess."

"No, you weren't wrong..."

"And you'd rather not talk about it. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Nothing personal, believe me. It's what works best for me, that's all."

"I understand," she said softly.

"I believe you do."

They both leaned a little closer to each other, and were almost touching when Sean's voice interrupted from the bottom of the stairs. "Aggie, can I have a bed-time story?"

"It seems like more than fourteen kids, somehow," Face groaned.

"Go upstairs," Aggie told the boy. "I'll be right up."

First, she went to the girls' bedroom, to a double bed where two of the smaller children were already asleep. She checked to make sure they were tucked in, then turned around when she heard Tracey whisper to her. "Aggie?"

"What is it?"

"Are we gonna be all right?"

She went to Tracey's bed and sat down beside her. What a question -- from a little girl who had learned so much in the past few days about both the best and the worst sides of people that it was a miracle she could digest it all. "Of course we are." She fervently hoped it wasn't a lie. "Temp's here in case we need him, and the others will be here in the morning. B.A., too."

"I mean for keeps, not just for tonight."

"We're gonna be just fine." The more she said it, the easier it was to believe it herself. "You'll see."

Tracey was half asleep. "B.A. says you should get at least eight hours of sleep every night."

Lately, most of what the girl said was something B.A. had already said -- at least once. Aggie found it both strange and wonderful that someone with such an imposing outward appearance could be so terrific with kids. Tracey worshipped him, and the other children weren't far behind. "I know. And if you get started right now, you won't have anything to worry about if he asks you."

"Okay."

Face appeared in the doorway. "I got the boys into bed," he told Aggie quietly. "And, uh, do you remember the reason Hansel and Gretel went into the woods in the first place?"

"Oh, Sean conned you into telling that story again, did he?"

The man bristled. "Nobody cons Templeton Peck! I hadn't thought about it for a while, and I just wondered, that's all."

The woman tucked Tracey in, then joined him in the hall. "Come on, let's go downstairs, and we can discuss it."

The sound of a truck engine penetrated her room, and Tracey sat up in bed. "What's that noise?" she called out.

"Just something going by on the highway," Face told her. Just then, he wanted nothing more than for her to go to sleep -- so he could have Aggie's undivided attention for the first time all night. He would have told her anything that would satisfy her.

But the noise was getting louder. Funny, how things like that could carry at night, and sound like they were right outside...

"It sounds so close..." The little girl sounded scared.

"You just go to sleep," Aggie said reassuringly. She headed back to the bed. "There's nothing to..."

The sound of the engine was quite loud; Face started across the room to look outside. Something wasn't right out there at all...

He was almost to the window when a loud crash shook the house right down to its foundation. Tracey screamed in terror; Aggie was knocked to the floor by the impact. Face ran to help her to her feet.

"I'm all right, Temp," she told him. "What in the...?"

Matt and two of the older boys ran in from their bedroom. "Aggie, they're outside!" Matt yelled.

Face piled the boys onto the bed, then pushed Aggie down beside Tracey. "Stay here!" he instructed, then ran out into the hallway.

The broken window at the end of the hall looked out onto the front lawn. Crouched in the window, out of sight, the Lieutenant had a ringside seat for the heavy bulldozer on the porch; it had just rammed into the front of the house. The man thought with a sigh that it was a good thing they'd done some reinforcing on that wall; otherwise, the old wooden structure might have crumbled like a badly-made house of cards. A substantial hole exposed part of the living room to the outside.

The bulldozer backed up for another run, Dan at the controls. Calvin stood several feet out of the path of the big vehicle, signalling which way to move.

Face ducked and covered his head as the bulldozer careened up onto the porch again and slammed into the front of the house. It burst completely through the outside wall.

Even the construction work done by the team couldn't keep the impact from sending chunks of plaster and shattered window glass raining down on top of him, and the floor heaved crazily, knocking him flat. Face pulled himself up on his elbows, wincing a little at the pain in his back where something had hit him. He coughed on plaster dust, but considered himself lucky; he was covered with myriad bits of building material, but the entire roof hadn't come down on him. He shook his swimming head to clear it; the next thing he was aware of was Aggie pulling on his arm and calling his name.

"Temp! Are you all right?"

He nodded briefly. "Yeah... Come on, we've gotta get the kids out of here -- now!"

She glanced out the window. "Oh, my God! What did they...?"

"No time for that now. Come on -- the kids!"

Aggie gathered the girls from their bedroom; Face, carrying Sean in his arms, led the boys out into the hallway where the two groups met. The kids congregated into a single frightened huddle, the older children standing with younger ones clinging to their nightgowns and robes. "Is this

everyone?" the Lieutenant asked.

The woman took a rapid head-count. "Yes."

Face addressed the entire group -- there was no time for fancy preliminaries. "Back stairs, single file, no talking. Stay behind me. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," Matt replied.

"Good. Let's move."

He handed Sean to Aggie and drew his revolver, keeping the huddle of kids sandwiched between the two adults as they made their way down the dark hallway. The back stairs were still intact and led to the kitchen at the rear of the house.

Downstairs, the engine noise was louder than ever, but steady and idling; it could accelerate at any time, from any side. They needed to move quickly. Face took several steps out the kitchen door and looked around; everything seemed to be clear. He motioned for Aggie and the kids to follow him out.

"All right, move out fast as you can. Don't stop until you get to the main road," he instructed.

The kids took off in groups of two and three, holding hands and running as fast as they could go. The man and woman waited until the children were all on their way; then they followed, Aggie still clutching Sean in her arms.

From the front of the house, Dan and Calvin watched them flee across the field in the moonlight. "That's the last of them," Dan remarked. He regarded what remained of the house. "They won't be back."

* * * * *

Dawn seemed forever in coming; but once it did, it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened the night before. The kids swarmed over the jungle gym at the abandoned drive-in theatre where the team had brought them, while Aggie sat on the running board of B.A.'s van and watched them play. They, at least, had gotten some sleep in the back of the van during the early morning hours after the team had answered Face's call for help from a roadside phone. But Aggie hadn't slept at all, and was painfully aware that it showed.

She looked up as Face approached her, bearing a paper cup of fast-food coffee. "Hot," he warned, handing it to her. "Watch your sip."

She took the cup, and he sat down beside her. "Look at them," she said numbly, watching the children on the monkey bars. "You'd never know they had their home kicked out from underneath them last night."

"Don't you think maybe that act is for you?" When she looked at him quizzically, he went on. "I'm serious. Don't you think it's just possible they don't want you to see them upset because they know how upset you are right now?"

"Why shouldn't I be upset? We just lost everything that ever meant anything to us. Our home, our possessions, each other..."

"Come on, everybody got out just fine -- not even a scratch."

"We've lost each other, Temp. The house is gone, and now, the kids will have to go to foster homes. I've tried to find a place that would take them all in, but I can't. We'll never see each other again."

Hannibal joined them. "Not with that attitude, you won't. Maybe you're ready to give in, but we haven't even started kicking yet."

"What's left to fight over?" she asked hopelessly.

"The house isn't gone, Miss Barrows. They just left you with some central air conditioning you didn't have before last night. The house is still there, and we intend to see that it stays there."

Aggie's expression brightened briefly, then faded again. "No. I can't live through that again. Maybe it's better if we just give in. Let the Army have it if they want it that badly. I won't risk my life over it any more than I'd risk any of theirs. It just isn't worth it."

"Well, if you're through with it, you won't mind if we get some last licks in."

"Don't you understand, Mr. Smith? I have to back out."

"You telling us we're fired?" When Aggie nodded, Hannibal grinned. "Well, since we agreed you're not able to pay us for this job, it's a little difficult to fire us, don't you think?"

"You'd go back there? After what almost happened to us last night, you'd go back there and fight over that broken-down shell? Why?"

"Because we care about you," Face explained. "Because we're committed."

"Mostly, because we don't want the Army to have it," Hannibal added.

"And because Hannibal's on the jazz," Face finished.

B.A. had one foot on the see-saw, moving it up and down slowly, with Sean on the other end. "Sometimes, I swear the man is as schizophrenic as Murdock," Face observed.

"Just be careful," Aggie told him.

"Always. Trust me."

She kissed his cheek. "All right. I'll hold you to that."

"Let's move," Hannibal announced, breaking into Face's moment. "Where's Murdock?"

On his knees on the other side of the van, Murdock crawled along slowly, looking for something on the ground. "Here, boy, here, Sandy... Come on, boy, we gotta roll now. I ain't got time to be playin' hide and seek with y'all. Come on out."

Face, looking on, shook his head. "Murdock..."

But the man was completely tuned out. "Where are you, boy?" When B.A.'s booted feet suddenly appeared in front of his face, he paused, then gingerly felt the toe of one boot. "This ain't no Hush Puppy."

The big man grabbed him by his collar and yanked him to his feet. "What you doin' now, fool?"

Completely used to the rough handling, Murdock bounced right back. "B.A., have you seen Sandy? I've looked everywhere. It looks like he's really flown the coop!"

"Course I ain't seen Sandy, turkey! Ain't nobody seen Sandy 'cept you, and that's 'cause only crazy people see invisible dogs! Now, get in the van so we can get movin'!"

"But Sandy liked you!" Murdock protested.

B.A. brandished a fist. "That dog was all in your head, man! Now, if you want anything left in your head, or any other part of your body, you get in that van!"

The Captain considered his options. "Well, since you put it that way..." He started to climb into the vehicle, and was soon assisted by a rough shove from B.A. Hannibal got in on the passenger side, and Face followed Murdock through the side door; he glanced nervously at B.A., who glared back at him before climbing into the driver's seat.

Aggie waved as the van pulled away. Face waved back. Be careful, she'd told him. Well, he intended to be. But it was nice that she cared, wasn't it?

* * * * *

The house had had many recent visitors over the past few days, but the most dangerous ones were there at that moment -- Tony Wolfe and his henchmen, Dan and Calvin, had arrived in their truck, and busily began unloading crates of plastic explosives. "I want the whole place set up," Wolfe said. "It all comes down at once."

"That's a hell of a charge you're talkin' about, man."

"I know what I'm doin'."

Calvin and Dan were, above all, yes-men. They did exactly as they were told, with little regard for consequences. As directed, they placed the key charges in and around the house -- under the front porch, under the main stairs, next to the fuse box in the basement. The house would come down, all right -- and it was going to be a hell of a bang.

B.A. had the entire scenario framed in his binoculars. "They're at it, all right," he reported to Face. "Must have enough dynamite down there to blow half this county right off the map."

"You have to put it like that, do you?" the Lieutenant groused. He took a walkie-talkie from his belt and spoke into it. "Hammer, this is Reflex. Do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Reflex," Hannibal's voice answered. "Report."

"We got all three of 'em down there, settin' up for the Fourth of July. Was this part of your 'plan, ' Colonel?"

"You and B.A. get back into the van. We'll regroup, and I'll fill you in on the newest developments."

"Roger." Face put the radio back on his belt. "Let's go, B.A. Hannibal's got some 'new developments' he'd like to share with us."

"Aw, man..."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

They both got to their feet. Crouching low, they turned from the house and began to make their way down the hillside.

* * * * *

Back at the drive-in, Aggie sat on the merry-go-round, watching the kids. Tracey joined her quietly. "Hiya, kiddo. What's up?" the woman asked with forced cheerfulness.

"You don't have to worry," the girl assured her. "They won't let anything happen to our house."

"They'll do their best, Trace. Like they promised us they would."

"Then why are you so worried?"

Good question, that. "Oh, I guess I'm just feeling sorry for myself. Instead of thinking about everything we could lose, I should be thankful we all got out safe. That's what's most important, not the material things."

"What's 'material things'?"

"What we had in the house. Like clothes, and keepsakes, special things. They really don't matter all that much. I just wish..."

"What?"

"I just wish I'd stopped long enough to take my parents' wedding picture. It meant a lot to me."

"But B.A. and the others will make sure the house is okay. We can go back later."

"I know they're going to try, honey, but just in case they can't, I... Well, the important thing is that we're all right. That old house is just going to have to come second."

A Frisbee flew past at close range, and Aggie turned to see who had thrown it. Matt ran over and picked it up. "Sorry, Aggie."

The social worker held out her hand for the Frisbee, and Matt gave it to her slowly, hesitantly. She stood up and tossed it over to one of the other children. "It's all in the wrist, fellas!" she called to them. Matt ran back to join the game, and Aggie went with him. A good distraction was exactly what she needed -- something to take her mind off one good-looking con man known as Templeton Peck...

Tracey watched her get involved in the game, and an idea began to form in her mind. She remembered the picture Aggie wanted, and knew exactly where it was -- on the dresser in Aggie's room on the second floor. The house wasn't far from the drive-in, and she knew her way there. It was something she could do for Aggie, after all the things Aggie had done for her and the rest of the kids.

She waited until the social worker was totally absorbed in the Frisbee game, then slowly, deliberately, walked to the corner of the building and climbed over the short fence. She figured it would only take an hour. Aggie would never even notice she was gone.

* * * * *

Wolfe checked his watch. "Five minutes, and it'll be a pile of toothpicks."

The three men stood in the back of their truck at the end of the driveway. The explosive charges were set and wired, and the timers were running. Five minutes to detonation.

Unbeknownst to Wolfe, he was clearly focussed in the sights of Murdock's automatic. The Captain lowered the barrel slightly so he could see "Wolfe Construction Company" written on the side of the truck, then squeezed the trigger.

Gunfire tore a neat row of holes in the side panel of the truck. Wolfe and his companions all dove for cover.

A hundred feet to the right, Hannibal and B.A. crouched behind a stone fence. Hannibal fired a round to announce their presence. "Hold it right there, Wolfe!" he ordered. "Unless you'd like me to punch a few holes in you!"

Calvin panicked and ran. He made it as far as the edge of the drive, where B.A. dropped on him. They struggled briefly, then the Sergeant knocked his target out with a well-placed blow to the jaw. He neatly disarmed Calvin, and turned to meet Dan's oncoming attack.

Dan swung at B.A.'s face -- which only served to anger the big man and injure his attacker's hand. The Sergeant picked him up and threw him over one shoulder. Dan landed in a limp heap twenty feet away, his gun flying from his grasp as he hit the gravel driveway.

Wolfe jumped into the driver's seat of his pick-up and started to pull out. Hannibal entered the moving vehicle from the passenger side, and they engaged in a spontaneous hand-to-hand combat as the truck rolled along in third gear, doing about thirty-five miles an hour. Wolfe swung the wheel wildly, unable to maintain control. The truck careened into the road, with its occupants trying to push one another out of the cab.

Hannibal at last succeeded in shoving Wolfe out the partially open driver's door, falling out himself in the process. Wolfe hit the ground and lay there stunned; Hannibal executed a neat stuntman's roll and got to his feet. The truck hit the stone fence, and its gas tank erupted in flames.

B.A. ran up as the Colonel jerked Wolfe to his feet. "Where's the detonator?" Hannibal demanded. When Wolfe hesitated, he repeated himself. "You heard me, slime-ball. Where is it?"

"You're too late. It's on a timer. In about two minutes, the whole place goes up."

The radio on B.A.'s belt crackled to life, shouting in Murdock's urgent voice. "Hannibal! Hannibal, come in, pronto!"

B.A. handed the radio over, and took Wolfe's collar in a firm grip. Hannibal tuned in. "What's the problem, Murdock?"

The Captain had his binoculars trained on the back door of the house; he'd seen Tracey go inside, and could now see Face running toward the house after her. "Colonel, that little Tracey just went in the back door."

Hannibal turned back to Wolfe. "Where are those charges?"

B.A. lifted the man a foot off the ground and shook him. "The man asked you a question, sucker!"

"All right, all right! There's one under the front porch, another one behind the stairs in the kitchen..."

"Faster!" B.A. snarled.

"And the fuse box, down in the cellar..."

"That's all?"

"Yes, yes, I swear..."

The big man dropped him and turned to the Colonel. "Two minutes."

Hannibal grabbed the radio again. "Murdock, Face, get in there and find that girl! B.A. and I will take care of the explosives."

Murdock took off after Face, and caught up with him in the kitchen. "I hope Hannibal's got this under control," Face remarked.

"Well, if he don't, and we end up gettin' blown to kingdom come, I sure hope they don't get mixed up and bury me with your legs -- your knees are real boney."

"Don't worry, Murdock. If we're still inside this house when it goes, there won't be enough of us left to pour into jelly jars."

"Such comforting thoughts in our time of trial."

The Lieutenant gestured him into the living room, as he himself started up the stairs. "Tracey!"

* * * * *

Wolfe's admission about the explosives seemed, at least so far, to be accurate and complete. B.A. located the one under the front porch, and swiftly removed the wires. The small dial on the front of the device stopped turning, and the "Activated" light went out.

Hannibal also had a measure of success. He carefully -- but hastily -- unscrewed the grips from the pair of wires that contacted the terminals on the device under the stairs. He yanked the wires away from the contacts and pulled back reflexively, but there was no explosion. He watched

the red light go out; the sweep hand stopped forty-five seconds short of detonation.

Upstairs, Tracey pulled out the lower drawer of Aggie's dresser and stood on it to gain enough height to reach the top. The picture was exactly where she'd known it would be; she put the small framed photo into her jumper pocket and climbed down.

"Tracey!" Out in the hall, Face was desperate. His own internal clock told him there was little if any time to spare now. "Tracey, where are you?"

When the little girl appeared in the doorway of Aggie's bedroom, he thought she was the most beautiful sight he was ever likely to see -- even if he lived long enough to get out of the house before it exploded. She looked surprised to see him. "I just came back for..."

The man switched on his walkie-talkie. "Murdock, I got her! Let's get out of here!"

Down in the living room, Murdock switched on his own radio. "I heard that."

Hannibal raced down the cellar stairs; he found B.A. already working on the charge near the fuse box. "Disarmed?" he asked hopefully.

The big man shook his head. "This one ain't like the others."

"It'll explode like the others, won't it?"

"This one's got three wires, not two. It's booby-trapped. We pull out the wrong wire, and the whole place goes up."

"Which one?"

"Could be the green. Could be the red..."

"Not the yellow?"

"Could be the yellow, too."

"Great! Glad I asked."

"It's anybody's guess, man. The trigger could be any one of 'em, and there ain't no tellin'..."

Murdock's voice reached them from the top of the cellar stairs. "Colonel, Face and Tracey are out in the..." He came down within sight of the fuse box, and stopped.

"We've got a problem," Hannibal told him -- as if he couldn't guess.

"You feel lucky?" B.A. inquired.

Murdock swallowed hard. "Actually, I feel kinda sick. May I please be excused?"

"Hannibal?"

"Maybe we should just go 'eenie, meenie, minie...!'"

"By the time we got to 'mo,' we'd be halfway to Sacramento -- airmail," Hannibal conjectured.

"Well, do something."

"Ten seconds," the Colonel reminded them. He could hear himself sweating. Both he and Murdock looked expectantly at B.A., who alternated between studying the bomb and looking at them -- helplessly. "B.A..." Hannibal prompted nervously.

Murdock glanced at his own watch. "Five..." He stuck his fingers into his ears and cringed.

B.A. yanked out the red wire. The red light on the front of the device went out, and the dial stopped its sweep across the face of the clock. The three men were silent for several seconds, then Murdock spoke hesitantly. "He did it?"

Hannibal nodded cautiously. "I think so."

When the blast didn't come, they all relaxed. "Takes a lickin', but it don't keep tickin'," Murdock assessed.

"Which one was it?"

"The red one."

"Why the red one?"

B.A. shrugged. "'Cause red means stop." He bristled when Murdock laughed. "It worked, didn't it?"

They heard a siren in the distance, and Face came halfway down the cellar steps. "What are you guys standing around for? Come on! That's Decker coming up the driveway!"

Hannibal checked his watch. "He's ten seconds late."

"Will you come on?"

They mounted the stairs; the siren grew louder. Hannibal was the last to leave. He paused by the dismantled explosive and considered the dangling red wire. "I love it when a plan comes together..."

* * * * *

Three days later, B.A. put the finishing touches on the paint around the frame of the new picture window that replaced the hole the bulldozer had made. "That's the end of that," he said, profoundly satisfied.

Aggie applauded, and the group of kids on the porch joined her eagerly. "I never thought I'd see this old place again -- except maybe holding up my next popsicle," the woman said.

"You won't have any more trouble with Mr. Wolfe." Hannibal lit a cigar. "The way Decker came in breathing fire, I'd say he's going to make sure Wolfe doesn't bother anybody again for a long time."

"He got what he deserved."

"Well, so did you," Face told her. "You got a place to call home, and you don't have to worry about being forced out of it."

"Thanks to all of you."

"It was our pleasure. Any time we can take something away from Decker is a red-letter day for us."

"I'd say your friend at the newspaper had a little to do with it, too."

The Lieutenant unfolded a paper and began to read aloud. "...Army sources close to the project, preferring to remain anonymous, admit it is unlikely that the proposed airfield will be constructed in the Los Angeles area. The president of Wolfe Construction Company could not be reached for comment." He tossed the paper aside. "He's scheduled for arraignment on the twenty-fifth. Nasty bit of press they got there. Who in the world would write such scathing innuendo?"

Hannibal held up his cigar in a parody of a toast. "To Amy. More power to the press."

Nearby, Murdock whistled a dog call. "Sandy? Is that you, boy?"

"Well, we can't wrap this one up yet. Murdock hasn't found Sandy." Hannibal called to the Captain. "Hey, if he doesn't have a collar on, he might have been picked up by the dog catcher."

"Oh, man, don't you start!" B.A. protested. "That dog ain't real! You know it, I know it -- and Murdock knows it! He just pretends he don't to make me mad!"

Face shrugged. "Well? It works, doesn't it?"

He lost his smug expression when B.A. scowled at him. Murdock motioned for them to be quiet. "Shhh!"

"I'm warnin' you, Murdock! There ain't no dog, and you better shut up before there ain't no more you!"

"Oh, come on, B.A., leave him alone," Hannibal said. "It could be worse, you know. It could be Thunder, the Mighty Stallion again -- and you remember how much you hated having him in your van."

"How can we thank you?" Aggie asked. She looked at the four men, smiling at them in turn.

Face smiled back when their eyes met. "Well, I have a few ideas..."

He kissed her on the cheek, then on the lips. B.A. looked to Hannibal, who only shrugged; then the big man looked away in aversion. When Murdock whistled again for Sandy, he grabbed him by the front of his jacket and roughly pulled him closer. "Now, listen up, Murdock. I've had enough of this..."

Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of a dog's bark reached their ears. Everyone but Murdock froze; Face and Aggie were affected enough to interrupt their kiss. Murdock brightened. "Sandy!"



"Heritage"

(By Mary Robertson)

"You want to talk about it?"

It was late, closing time. The bartender was alone in the Officers' Club, save for a solitary figure at a corner table. Usually, he sent his late-night drinkers home with a friendly pat on the shoulder and a few well-chosen words on the advisability of moderation. After all, everyone had problems; the Cylons had seen to that.

But this drinker was hardly his usual customer. Colonel Apollo seldom frequented the Club, and on those rare occasions when he did visit, it was always with friends. Tonight, though, he sat alone, brooding over his mug.

"Huh?" The bartender's words had finally registered.

"You want to talk about it?" the man repeated. "I'm a good listener. Sometimes, it helps to talk out your problems."

He slid into the seat opposite the solitary man, setting a drink of his own on the table before him.

Apollo sighed, and shook his head, allowing the silence to stretch over long centons. "It's not a problem, really," he said suddenly, gazing into his half-empty mug. "More of a memory." He hesitated before adding, "Today, we showed the older children tapes of the Destruction of the Colonies."

"What? Why?" He certainly hadn't expected that.

"It's their heritage," Apollo replied quietly. The anesthetic effects of the alcohol were dissipating rapidly, and the bartender saw deep pain reflected in the eyes that met his own. "Most of those children were born in space. They need to understand the Destruction, the need for vigilance, the reasons their parents hate the Cylons..." He paused. "Now, they do understand..."

The bartender saw something besides the destruction of innocence in those pain-filled eyes. "You watched," he said flatly.

"How could I ask anyone else to watch that again? No, I sent them away until the worst was over. Boxey insisted on staying..." That thought brought the stirrings of a smile. "I suppose I should use his given name now that he's grown. Troy... But he'll always be Boxey to me."

"It's only right. He's your son."

"He's a fine young man. If only Serina..." He broke off abruptly, fighting to control the tears.

It was then the bartender truly understood. Apollo's story was no secret. His all-too-brief

marriage had ended when the Cylons killed his wife, leaving him a young son to raise alone. Serina had been a reporter before the Destruction, and her image was prominent on the final tapes, the tapes he'd forced himself to watch.

Although he chose not to admit it, Apollo had never really gotten over Serina's death. That, too, was common knowledge. And now, the iron-willed Colonel Apollo, hero of the Colonial Fleet, sat mourning her loss.

This, then, was a wake, a final and private acknowledgement of the pain he'd denied while his son needed a father, while his people needed a hero. Tomorrow, the bartender was sure, the Colonel would be as cool and fully in control as ever, but tonight...

Well, sometimes it was easier to share your sorrows with a mug -- or with the man who filled it -- than with a friend.

He quietly left the table and ducked behind the bar, returning in a moment with a dusty bottle and two glasses. "Real ambrosia, real old," he said in answer to his companion's unspoken question. "I've been saving this for something special."

Deliberately, and with great ceremony, he uncorked the bottle and poured some of its golden contents into the glasses. Then he lifted one glass. "To Serina."

"To Serina," Apollo repeated softly.

"And," the bartender added silently as he drank, "to the man who loves her still."

Some day, when their children's children heard the story of the Destruction, that tale would include a handsome young Captain and a beautiful young woman, and a love that endured even beyond death. "And that," the bartender thought, "is a heritage for us all."



"Ransom Demand"

(By Linda Ruth Pfonner)

"Well, we have the raw materials for success," Lee Fontenot announced as he hung up the telephone. "That was Colonel Davies. He received the shipment, intact and undamaged."

Keith Palmer laughed. "Think how upset the government would be if they knew we used the U.S. Postal Service to ship the stuff. From Pasadena, no less!"

"It isn't 'stuff,'" Dr. James Everett Axelrod growled. He had a right to be annoyed; after all, he'd spent years developing the nasty little drug that would surely make him quite wealthy, quite soon. These men were merely part of the machinery necessary to acquire the money. "It has a proper name. Since without it you would all still be wage slaves, I suggest you at least use that proper name."

"That's easy for you to say, Doc," Palmer protested. "It may be the greatest thing since the bomb for holding a government up for ransom, but I can't pronounce it!"

"Ah-phase-ee-ace," the biochemist instructed, stretching the word out into its component syllables, accenting the second. "Perhaps you would like a shot? It will remove all your worries in that area..."

"Ah, no, thanks, Doc!" Palmer shook his head hastily. "That's kinda drastic. I'll pass, if it's all the same to you."

Axelrod shrugged, and went back into the kitchen for more coffee.

"Y'know, Keith, one shot of aphasiase isn't permanently incapacitating," Fontenot pointed out genially. "As a matter of fact, one shot is real nice, if you judge from the test subjects..."

Palmer suppressed a shudder. "Yeah, I know. But I don't like playing games with my brain chemistry. It scares hell out of me!"

Fontenot nodded. "Yeah, me, too. What do you think, Dan?" he asked their heretofore silent companion. "Is Dr. Axelrod a fruit-cake?"

Daniel Moreland spread his hands wide. "I don't know. Probably. Most geniuses are a little weird, aren't they?"

"I guess so," Fontenot agreed. "Comes with the territory."

"Y'know who really scares me?" Moreland asked. "Colonel Davies, that's who."

Fontenot frowned. "He's just a mercenary soldier. The Doc hired him for a percentage of the ransom we get."

"He's not just a mercenary," Moreland contradicted. "He's the commander of an entire mercenary regiment, Lee! That's hundreds of men! Even if they aren't up to full strength, they've got us

outnumbered and outgunned. He's even got the aphasiase, now. What does he need us for? That scares me. That scares me a lot."

"Well, if he's gonna betray us, there's nothing we can do about it," Fontenot observed philosophically. He stood up and stretched. "I found out where that other guy is, the one the Doc wants to use as the preliminary demonstration. So we better go pick him up."

"Why him?" Palmer wanted to know. "Wouldn't anybody do? Why do we have to go chasing after this one particular guy?"

"It's Colonel Davies' idea," Fontenot explained, heading for the door. "He's some kind of intelligence officer, maybe CIA, and Davies thinks he's likely to be the worst threat to our plans. So we eliminate him as a threat at the very beginning. He'll never know what hit him."

"I remember, he's got a weird name, too. What is it?"

"Stringfellow Hawke."

* * * * *

"Me, too!"

"You, too, what, Dominic?" Caitlin O'Shaunessy inquired as she stepped up into the trailer.

Stringfellow Hawke lay flat on the lower bunk, his hands laced behind his head, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans so old and so worn that they fit him like a second skin. He watched through half-closed eyes as Caitlin saw him, caught her breath, then hurriedly turned away. Privately, he wondered why he so enjoyed taunting her. He knew she wanted him badly; why else would she quit her job in Texas and follow him across four states?

But she moved very slowly; it seemed she wanted to be friends more than lovers. He considered that was preferable; personally, he was too wary of inevitable consequences to enter into any relationship casually. It might ruin their friendship, and he didn't want to risk that -- he didn't have so many friends that he was willing to toss them away carelessly.

"Forest fires make me nervous, too." Dominic Santini was busy with the coffee-maker, oblivious -- or was he? -- to the silent tension between Caitlin and Hawke.

The woman shivered, and sat down in the dinette booth, where three massive tuna hero sandwiches waited. "Me, too," she agreed. "The smoke permeates everything, makes it seem even hotter than it is. And I've been having nightmares about fires and burnings every night. I'll be glad when this job's done."

Hawke swung his feet to the floor and sat up. "That's the truth," he nodded. "We're only about a mile behind the fire-break here, too. If the wind changes, this camp'll go up like a torch."

"You're a bundle of cheer this afternoon," Caitlin growled.

He shrugged, and slid onto the dinette bench beside her. "Could be worse," he pointed out.

"How?"



He picked up his sandwich. "We could be afoot."

Santini laughed, and brought the coffee. "Don't be silly," he chuckled as he sat down opposite them. "The only reason we're here is that we do the best aerial photography in California. If it wasn't for that, we'd be home in Van Nuys."

"Contemplating starvation," Caitlin finished his thought. "This has been a long dry spell, in more ways than one."

The older man nodded. "You're right. This documentary came along just as I was considering mortgaging the choppers."

Hawke chuckled, knowing Santini was kidding -- although things had been getting a little tight. They ate in a companionable silence that was interrupted a few minutes later by a hurried knock on the side of the trailer.

"Yeah?" Hawke was seated facing the door, so he answered. He could see the man standing there, and decided he must be part of the film crew, although he didn't recognize him.

"Hawke? That chopper of yours is leakin' oil or somethin'," the man said anxiously; he made no effort to enter the trailer, speaking through the screen door. "It's makin' the gang nervous, what with all this ash flyin' around the camp..."

Santini frowned, and started to get up. Hawke waved him back. "Finish eating, Dom," he ordered as he stood up. "I'll take a look. It hasn't been parked for half an hour yet. It can't be too bad; it was fine when we landed."

The older man relaxed. "Okay. I'll be out when I finish."

"Okay."

Hawke followed the stranger out, grabbing his discarded shirt as he went. He shrugged it on as he walked around the camper and followed the other man as they threaded their way through the other trailers that made up the film crew's temporary camp. The last vehicle was the director's trailer -- Mickey Jeldorn surely wasn't there now, was busy checking dailies in the makeshift screening tent at the other end of camp.

As Hawke passed Jeldorn's trailer, he was roughly tackled by two men. One hit him high, at the shoulders, and the other hit him low and dirty. He went down struggling, and won free for one breathless moment. But before he could scramble to his feet, he was hit again -- and went down again, under the crushing weight of a huge man who knew how to use his considerable bulk to his best advantage.

Pinned -- but still fighting -- Hawke never saw the man who slipped up on his blind side to pull a burlap bag over his head. As the draw-string was pulled chokingly tight around his throat, he inhaled -- only to find that the bag contained a large wad of cotton soaked in some thoroughly noxious fluid. The horrible stench of it filled his nose and mouth, and all the strength fled his body as he fought just to stay conscious.

But he had to breathe, and with the second breath, reality vanished into blackness. He abruptly went limp in his captors' grasp.

"Boy, that stuff works fast!" Palmer panted as he got up, inspecting his bruises, wondering if his wrist was broken.

"Good thing," Fontenot pointed out, also seriously out of breath. "He's a god-damned wildcat! The Doc didn't tell us he was a karate expert! C'mon, haul him over here..."

Moreland helped drag their prisoner over to a nearby Blazer. They tossed him into the rear cargo area.

"Keith, get that bag off his head, will you?" Moreland asked as he climbed in behind the wheel.

"He'll wake up," Fontenot protested as he slid into the seat beside Moreland.

"He'll O.D. on the stuff if we don't," the big man pointed out quietly. "He's no use to us dead. Take it off."

"Okay." Palmer reached in to remove the bag, and thoughtfully handcuffed the prisoner to the tailgate. Then he covered Hawke's motionless body with a blanket, and trotted around the truck to take his own seat. "Okay, let's go..."

* * * * *

When Hawke didn't return by the time Santini and Caitlin finished eating, they went to the chopper. There was no sign of Hawke anywhere around. The older man frowned, and studied the helicopter thoughtfully. There was no evidence of anything leaking. He shrugged, and turned away. "He'll show up. You wanna come watch the dailies, Caitlin?"

"I certainly do! I want to see if that camera operator's terror shows up on film!"

The man laughed, and they headed for the projection truck. Caitlin's pointed boot-toe struck something silvery and metallic, and she bent to pick it up. It was a bracelet.

"It's a... Dominic! Look!"

It was a POW/MIA bracelet. Santini took it from her and turned it so he could read the engraving. "Saint John Hawke..." he whispered. "This is String's bracelet! How did it get here?"

"It's bent, look at it." Caitlin knelt to study the ground around them, and nodded toward some scrapes and scuffs. "Look at that, Dom. Looks like somebody was dragged across here..."

He felt his guts tighten, and he could hardly breathe. "He's been kidnapped," he said harshly, knowing it was true.

She looked up, startled. "Kidnapped? Why would anyone kidnap a stunt pilot?"

"That's not all he is," Santini reminded her quietly.

She took a deep breath. She had forgotten, for just a moment, that they were -- all three of them -- Firm agents of sorts. It had been weeks since Archangel had called on them.

"Well, I guess we have to call Michael now," she sighed. "Nobody here will believe String's been kidnapped."

"Let's ask around. Maybe somebody saw the fight. If there's a witness, Mickey will have to believe us." But Santini knew the search would be fruitless; if anyone on the film crew had seen Hawke attacked and carried off, they surely would have told him.

Nonetheless, they searched the entire camp. No one had seen Hawke, no one had seen the fight, and they found no more clues. One of the fire-fighters said he'd seen a red Blazer leave at about the right time, but he didn't know who was in the vehicle. The assistant director told them the company had no Blazers on their budget.

Santini took firm hold of his temper and his fears and left the camp, headed back for Van Nuys, Caitlin flying silent and grim beside him. She landed him at his hangar, then reluctantly went back to the film site to fulfill Santini Air's obligations there -- and to keep an eye out for Stringfellow Hawke.

Santini called Archangel.

"Hello, Dominic," Michael Goldsmith Briggs III said pleasantly. "To what do I owe the honour of this call?"

"String's been kidnapped."

There was a moment of silence from the other end of the line. Then, "How? What happened?"

Santini explained what he knew, and what he and Caitlin guessed. Archangel was by turns shocked and distressed. He was satisfied with the measures they'd already taken, but could be of no additional help.

"I'm sorry, Dominic. But we have no information on anyone planning to make a play for either of you or for AIRWOLF -- you know I always keep you up to date on such things..."

"I know," the older man admitted in a low voice. "I just hoped something had just turned up..."

"Nothing," Archangel repeated. "But I'll put everyone I can spare on it."

"I suppose there isn't much else I can do, then, is there?"

"No," the Firm official said softly. "Just stay available. I'll call when I have something to tell you."

"Thanks, Michael." Numbly, Santini hung up the phone, and dropped into his chair behind the desk. All he could do now was wait.

* * * * *

"So this is the infamous Stringfellow Hawke."

Dr. James Everett Axelrod, BS, MS, Ph.D. in biochemistry from MIT, felt extremely cheerful and confident. The cheer was based on the fact that his plans were going so very well. The confidence came entirely from the fact that his prisoner was most securely chained.

At the moment, Hawke was even reasonably comfortable. He was chained on a long, well-cushioned

couch. His wrists were shackled together, and a chain ran from the shackles over the couch's arm to the floor, where it was presumably locked to something, since he couldn't pull it free. A similar arrangement bound his ankles. He didn't have any slack, but he wasn't at all strained.

This arrangement was a welcome relief from the ordeal of the drive down the mountain. He awakened some time during the trip, only to find himself terribly sick from the drug they'd employed to subdue him. Half smothered under a heavy wool blanket, his wrists bound behind him and fastened to the tailgate of the Blazer, he had been severely battered by the stiffness of the vehicle's suspension as it ran over the rough mountain roads. Stubbornly, he had endured in silence, and was grateful to lose consciousness again.

When they hauled him out of the truck -- sick, shaking, faint, and filthy -- he managed to summon enough awareness to look around. Much to his delight, he recognized the neighbourhood -- he and Dominic had helped film an episode of a television detective show here a few months before. He was in south Pasadena.

He passed out again when they tried to shove him up the steps onto the porch of an apartment building, and awakened here, chained firmly to the couch. His clothing was clean but damp, and he assumed they had shoved him under a shower before binding him.

All he really wanted was about ten minutes of solitude. The shackles holding him had childishly simple locks, and a piece of wire was all he needed to open them easily. Just ten minutes alone, and he could be free. Until that opportunity presented itself, however, he would have to cope with being a prisoner.

Now, addressed by the man his captors respectfully called "sir" or "Dr. Axelrod," he simply returned the man's regard impassively, and made no effort to answer.

"Ah, stoicism! Admirable trait, usually." Axelrod was becoming effusive, and Hawke gritted his teeth. "You don't look like much of a threat, but I have been advised that you are, and I trust my advisor. Therefore, I will make you the first official demonstration of the capabilities of my brain-child. It's called aphasiase. Do you know what aphasia is, Mr. Hawke?"

The prisoner blinked, but didn't speak.

"Correct!" Axelrod burbled. "The impairment of the ability to speak or understand speech. By extension, it can include the written or printed word. My formula causes aphasia, Mr. Hawke. And you will be my first true subject, experiments aside."

"One injection usually causes only some varying level of disorientation, but after the series is complete, so is the aphasia. By then, it is also an irreversible condition."

Hawke froze involuntarily, then hoped his captors hadn't noticed. He could move a little, but he couldn't fight back...

"Keith," Axelrod turned, calling into the next room, "bring me my kit, will you?"

Hawke struggled frantically against the chains that held him, but before he could accomplish anything, the man called Keith came into the room, carrying a small leather wallet. The prisoner took a deep breath to steady himself, and watched as the newcomer opened the wallet. He took out a hypodermic syringe, a length of rubber tubing, and a small glass bottle.

He loaded the syringe from the bottle, then set it aside and approached the prisoner. Hawke knew he didn't have enough slack to fight, so he didn't even try. He held himself still while Palmer split his sleeve from wrist to shoulder and tightened the tubing around his arm above the elbow to raise a vein. The glass syringe glittered a baleful purplish colour when the light struck the medication it held.

Hawke twitched when he felt the needle, then had to fight to stifle a moan as a hot rush of almost sexual pleasure swept over him as the drug flowed into his bloodstream. It was ecstasy, and the taste of sugared limes rose in his throat. He sank down into his blankets, trembling.

Axelrod studied his victim clinically. "Yes, the euphoric effect is linked to administration by injection," he spoke quietly into a microrecorder he had removed from his pocket. "Subjects who received the aphasiase by inhalation or ingestion experienced the primary effect with no appreciable side effects that could be positively linked to the drug itself. We will continue the injections on this subject; he is too formidable an opponent to be permitted full awareness until we release him." He crouched down on the floor directly in front of the sofa. "Hawke? Can you hear me? Can you understand me? Say something, Hawke."

But the prisoner stared past him, unseeing.

* * * * *

Hawke had understood the doctor's words well enough. He had simply chosen not to respond.

For the first few days -- he lost track of time, but knew he had received more than a dozen injections, so it must have been quite a while -- the only thing he was truly aware of was the golden euphoria of the drug. But, after some time, the wonderful golden haze began to thin, the sweet taste of limes began to sour, and reality began to soak in. Once, he woke from wondrous dreams to the sound of a strident argument among his captors, and, startled by the sudden clarity of his perception, he listened.

"But the message to the Governor said SimsVille," Palmer protested. "What's Lloyd's Corners got to do with anything?"

"You're a fool," Axelrod replied, his voice iron-hard and utterly uncompromising. "Lee, you and Daniel take the camper to Lloyd's Corners and begin the project there. I want Keith here where I can keep an eye on him."

"But, Doc..."

"Shut up, Keith. You do what you're told, when you're told. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

A few minutes later, Palmer gave Hawke his next shot, and the prisoner heard no more as the fresh dose swept all the grimness of reality away. Sometimes, during his brief intervals of lucidity, he realized Palmer's arrival would end his temporary state of rationality and normality, and a burning hatred for the big man began to grow in him.

After several days, the euphoria and sweet golden bemusement faded relentlessly away, leaving him feeling old and dry and empty. He became aware, for the first time, that he had not been fed at all. And that hunger had significantly weakened him.

But the worst thing was that, as the golden haziness faded, it took with it all his verbal skills. While he was high, he hadn't cared what his captors said; now, although they spoke freely in his presence, the words were meaningless noise. Magazines left within his sight were incomprehensible pages of abstract patterns. And, to make it worse, his captors knew, and smiled when they noticed his desperate attention.

Frustrated, Hawke ground his teeth and fought, every moment he was alone, to free himself. He remembered his initial opinion -- that these shackles would be easy to defeat. But, along with his ability to communicate, the golden haze seemed to have taken some of his physical dexterity as well; his hands were clumsy, his fingers numb. The shackles resisted him, matching their inanimate stubbornness against his growing panic.

Finally, Axelrod came and knelt in front of him, speaking to him. The words were meaningless gibberish.

Hawke's incomprehension must have shown on his face, for the doctor laughed softly and patted him on the head. All his frustrations leaped in him, and Hawke snapped viciously, catching Axelrod's finger in his teeth. With a dexterous wrench and a twist of his head, he deliberately snapped the bone before he let the man go.

Axelrod squaled like a branded calf, and fled, clutching his injured hand. Hawke spat blood from his mouth and relaxed a little, feeling a bit more self-satisfied than at any time since his capture. There was some shouting in the other room, but he ignored it. He'd worked on his bonds every possible moment, and now managed, finally, to free his hands, then his feet.

Wrists abraded and bleeding, sick, dizzy and weak from hunger, Stringfellow Hawke stumbled to his feet and headed for the door.

* * * * *

Santini paced in the Santini Air hangar, watching the street outside, an ear tuned to the phone in his office. His temper shortened day by day. Caitlin called regularly, and he kept her up to date.

The phone rang, and he sprinted for it. "Yes?"

"Well, it's broken now, Dominic," Archangel sighed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"We received a ransom demand an hour ago." The agent's voice was heavy with weariness. "Or rather, the Governor of California received it. They want half a billion dollars, or they'll destroy all the people in Los Angeles."

"How? And what's that got to do with String?"

"They've got Hawke. They perceived him as a threat, so, as they expressed it, 'to kill two birds with one stone,' they captured him and used him as their first demonstration that their threats are not idle. They claim they'll send him back to us within the week. That's to prove they can do what they claim. The second demo is scheduled for a little farming hamlet called Simsville. I doubt it has more than a thousand people. The message says they'll destroy the town the way

they've destroyed Hawke, and..."

"You mean he's dead?" Santini interrupted, horrified. "They've killed him?"

"There is no indication that's what they mean. The communiqué is very precise in its wording. Hawke has not been killed, he has been 'destroyed.' They state they will destroy Simsville in the same way. We will then have two weeks to collect the ransom, or L.A. goes, too."

"That's crazy..."

"I know," Archangel agreed. "And unless, or until, we have more information one way or the other, we can withhold credence of their bizarre claims and demands. But I believe we have to take this seriously. Hawke is missing, and under decidedly suspicious circumstances. How else would they know he's missing, unless they're responsible?"

Santini gnawed his lip. "I reported him missing to the police."

The Firm agent found himself getting angry, and forced himself to remain civil. "I could wish you hadn't done that," he said quietly, "but I understand why you did. I don't think it can do any harm."

"I didn't say how we lost him," the older man explained. "I just said he was gone. I haven't heard anything constructive from them yet. You don't have any idea who sent that ransom demand, do you?"

"No," he admitted. "The message was sent by telegram, by phone, paid for with a stolen credit card, from a pay phone in downtown Los Angeles. It could have been anyone, and there's really no way to check; the phone was in the main concourse of a shopping mall."

There was little Santini could say to that.

* * * * *

Finding his way around Los Angeles without being able to read, talk, or understand speech was frustrating, but not impossible. Hawke resorted to navigating by stars and landmarks, since street signs were meaningless to him; he hid from people who took too pointed an interest in his presence.

Both his handicap and his stubborn pride kept him from even attempting to ask for help. He rationalized it by arguing that he was too helpless to permit the authorities to get their hands on him; he could neither explain nor identify himself. His fingerprints were on record -- but only in the Firm's classified files; Archangel had arranged for fakes to be substituted in his military records, for his own protection, during an undercover assignment several years before the AIRWOLF project. The authorities would lock him up in a psychiatric ward somewhere -- and that was something he refused to tolerate even thinking about. He was going home, back to Dominic -- and nothing would stop him.

He had little difficulty escaping from the cheap apartment where he'd been held prisoner; Axelrod was injured badly enough to require medical attention, and Palmer had taken him, so there was no one in the apartment. True to his own inclinations, he'd gone out the back way, into a fenced yard. He'd gone over the fence and through the opposite yard, then deliberately wove a random path for several blocks before settling down to figure out how to get back to Van Nuys, to

Dominic.

It never occurred to him that Dominic Santini might still be up in the woods filming forest fires. The older man would be looking for him, and waiting for him to find his way home.

He considered trying to call Dominic, or Michael, or someone, but a moment's pause at a pay phone finished that idea. He had no money and, try though he might, could not talk; the words rolled around in his head, but only meaningless noise came out of his mouth. Frustrated, he savagely ripped the phone off its mount, smashed it against the sidewalk, and went on his way -- unaware of the handful of people who saw him and gave him a wide berth.

Before he'd travelled the scant six miles from Pasadena to Glendale, the police were looking for him. They didn't connect him with the missing persons report filed by the owner of Santini Air on his chief stunt pilot, although the basic description -- thirty to thirty-five years old, five feet eleven, one hundred sixty pounds, slim, blond, blue eyes -- matched. Instead, they received a string of reports as civilians reported seeing a disheveled, sick-looking man dressed in old jeans and the rags of a shirt, who never spoke, growled sometimes when people approached him too closely, and was seen to destroy a pay phone near the Rose Bowl and to quickly defeat four teen-aged hoods who'd been about to mug an old lady in Burbank. When she attempted to thank her rescuer, he'd backed away from her, then abruptly took to his heels when he heard an approaching police siren.

No one knew who he was, but it was plain, based upon the sightings, that he was headed west. Successive patrol areas sighed with relief when confirmed sightings were reported west of their jurisdictions; no police officer likes running into psychotics -- especially those who possess formidable combat skills.

This state of affairs went on for nearly two days, while the police departments' public liaison officers fought to keep all news of the stranger out of the media. Finally, one Van Nuys officer and his partner came up with a viable plan -- and consequently were prepared when they spotted the suspect staggering wearily up Sherman Way, looking about ready to collapse.

"Jeez, he looks like he's on his last legs," Jim Gaines said, shaking his head sympathetically.

"Yeah. I don't think he could run if he wanted to," his partner, Bryan Ramirez, agreed. "But we'll take it easy anyway. Let me out here."

Gaines stopped the car, and Ramirez got out. He fitted his cap onto his head and slid his baton into its ring on his belt.

"Don't push him," Gaines warned. "And don't crowd him. He's got a short fuse, and he's hell on wheels, according to the report from Burbank. I'm not ready to trade you in yet. Besides, brand-new partners are getting expensive."

"Okay, Mom," Ramirez laughed. He was accustomed to the other man's nervousness; they had been partners for three years. "Personally, I think the guy looks like he went fifteen rounds in a cement mixer with Marvin Hagler."

He started following the suspect, staying behind him, but closing the gap. Gaines drove the car around the block so he could come in from the other side without the suspect noticing.

Ramirez was amazed by what he saw. The guy was half-dead; how had he managed to evade capture

for two whole days? And how far had he come? Pasadena was nearly twenty miles from Van Nuys. He shrugged, and dismissed the thought as irrelevant. "Hey, mister," he called softly.

The blond man whirled, falling into a battle-ready crouch the officer, himself a Viet Nam combat veteran, recognized immediately. "Well, I'll be damned... Commando training..." he breathed.

Then he smiled ruefully, and held his empty hands out at shoulder height. "Look, man, I don't want to hurt you. I'm a peace officer, I want to help you." He did not approach, and the suspect relaxed a little, since no threat materialized.

Ramirez kept talking, swiftly realizing it didn't matter what he said, as long as his tone of voice was soft and gentle. The man slowly straightened from his crouch, eyeing him warily. "There, see? I don't want to hurt you. You look half-starved; are you hungry?" He pulled a Hershey bar out of his pocket and offered it.

Hawke swayed dizzily. He couldn't read the wrapper, but the colours were familiar -- it was chocolate. It had been days since he'd eaten, and, almost without conscious decision, he reached for it.

The police officer let him take the candy, and watched him unwrap it with hurried clumsiness. He spoke quietly as Gaines parked the car a few feet away and got out, moving slowly toward them.

"Take it easy, Jimmy," he warned. "My guess is he was a commando of some kind, maybe a Green Beret, or else he's some kind of high-level martial artist. He's starving now, though..."

"How can anybody starve in Los Angeles?"

At the first sound of a voice behind him, Hawke whirled, then backed away from both officers, his eyes flicking from one to the other suspiciously.

"It doesn't seem too difficult -- he's doing it," Ramirez pointed out. "I'll bet he hasn't got a penny, and he doesn't seem to be able to either talk or understand speech. He reacts to the tone of your voice."

When neither officer made any overt move toward him, Hawke let himself relax a bit. He was too close to the airport now to have it all ruined because he got arrested. He looked around, seeking some means of escape.

Overhead, he heard the familiar muffled rhythm of a civilian helicopter. Out of lifelong habit, Hawke glanced up at it -- and gasped in amazement. It was Michael's white Angel -- headed for Santini Air!

Completely forgetting the police, he began to run.

"Hey...!" Startled by his sudden action, the two officers were a few steps behind him. "I've heard of combat vets running from low-flying planes," Gaines panted. "But the choppers were always the good guys..."

"Just follow him!" Ramirez snapped. "He's running toward it. What's up there?"

"The private side of the airport. You know, charter services, stunt flyers, helicopters..."

The partners glanced at one another as they both remembered the missing persons report they'd taken earlier in the week.

"That's Santini's missing pilot!" Gaines exclaimed in delight. "I'd bet on it!"

"Looks like we know where he's going -- Santini's hangar."

"Looks like."

Hawke saw the Angel spiral down for a showboat landing just outside the Santini Air hangar, and paused for a moment, leaning against a neighbouring building, trying to catch his breath. He was dizzy, and he felt terrible. All he wanted was to make it back to Dominic. Dom had always been there, had taken care of him all his life. Once he got back to Dom, he and Michael would figure out a way to help him. He was too exhausted to think about much more than that.

He saw Santini come out to meet Archangel, and wanted to shout to attract their attention, but nothing came out except a breathless, pitiful whimper. He was startled when he heard another voice behind him; he'd completely forgotten the two police officers.

"Hey, Mr. Santini...!" Gaines yelled.

Dominic Santini looked up, mildly bemused to see two of Los Angeles' finest afoot. Then one of them pointed, and he gasped.

"String! My God, String...!" He ran across the tarmac. Hawke's face wore such an expression of utter desperation that he didn't try to speak, just hugged him fiercely, satisfied that he was back, and alive.

A moment later, he felt all the tension in his friend drain utterly away, and caught Hawke as he wilted, easing him down to the ground. Hawke was unconscious, and he was suddenly frightened all over again.

The two police officers caught up with him. "Mr. Santini," Gaines greeted him. "I take it this is your missing friend?"

"Yeah, this is String. But what happened to him?"

"We don't know, sir." Jim Gaines was the senior partner, so he did all the talking. "He's been on the streets for approximately forty hours. The first report was from Pasadena, and he's been moving steadily west. We just spotted him ten minutes ago on Sherman, headed this way."

"He walked? Why didn't he just call me?"

"Sir?" Gaines spoke very gently, and Santini looked up at him, frightened. "Mr. Santini, we don't think he can talk. He didn't seem to understand anything we said to him, and he never answered. He acted...wary. Not afraid, exactly, but unsure of how we would react. He was quite determined, I think, that nothing was going to keep him from getting back to you."

Before anyone could comment on that, Hawke stirred groggily, and sat up, unaware of his friend's assistance. He blinked and looked around, seemed reassured when he saw Santini and Archangel, and faced the police warily, making certain Dominic was behind him.

Gaines coughed politely. "Well, if there's nothing more we can do to help, we'll get back to our car before some street gang strips it. We'll close the missing persons file on him, Mr. Santini, and you can come downtown at your convenience to finish the paperwork. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure. Thanks, guys."

"No problem. That's what we're here for. Good-bye."

The civilians waited until the police were out of earshot. Then Santini took Hawke by both shoulders and shook him. "Where the blazes have you been, String? I've been worried sick...!" He stopped abruptly, frightened by the lack of resistance he felt. Hawke sagged forward to lean on him for a moment. "String...?"

Hawke swallowed hard. He'd been subsisting on determination and sheer strength of will for two days. Now that he'd found Dominic and Michael, all his motivation ebbed away. But he had to explain...

"String...?" Santini's concern was clearly audible. "String? What's wrong with you?"

The others watched, not understanding, as Hawke slowly pulled the rags of his sleeve away from his arm. Then Santini gasped in horror. The inside of the younger man's arm was lacerated with needle tracks. Hawke pointed to the tracks, then, deliberately, to his own mouth. Then he shrugged and shook his head, spreading his hands wide in an unmistakable gesture of helplessness.

"He was captured and drugged," Archangel translated, standing behind the other man and leaning on his cane. "That must be why he can't talk; the drug prevents it. And look at his wrists."

Santini saw the cuts and bruises, and tapped the wrist near the damage. Hawke nodded, and crossed his wrists briefly to pantomime imprisonment.

"Dominic, if he walked away from his captors, do you think he could lead us back to where he was being held?"

"How about it, String? Could you find your way back?"

Hawke stared at him. He could tell from the inflection that Dominic was asking a question, but the words meant nothing, no matter how hard he listened.

"The police were right," Archangel said gently. "He doesn't understand, either, any more than he can speak. I don't know what sort of drug this is, but it seems to short out the language processor of the brain."

"Hellish stuff." Santini hid his growing fear and fished around in his jacket pocket until he found his car keys, which he offered to Hawke. Then he tapped the younger man's arm near the needle marks. "What do you say, String?"

Hawke blinked. He knew what Dom wanted; it was easy enough to deduce. But he was so very tired...

Then he shrugged off all his misgivings; he was the only one who knew where Axelrod was, and he'd overheard enough conversation during his imprisonment to know, more or less, what the man was planning. The ransom demand must already have been made, or Michael wouldn't be here...

He took the keys, and struggled to his feet. Santini helped him; Archangel just watched as he headed toward the Jeep parked nearby. But the closer he approached it, the more slowly he moved. He stopped beside the vehicle, and hesitantly reached for the door handle.

But he couldn't bring himself to touch it. Shaking, he backed a step away. A hand touched his shoulder; conditioned by two days on the streets, he moved too fast, jerking away and whirling to face a startled Dominic Santini.

The older man held out a hand, spoke softly -- and there was pain in his eyes. Hawke shivered, and turned away. It had been selfish of him to come here, where Dominic would agonize over him, out of some childish belief that Dom somehow could make everything right, as he always had when Hawke was a child. He should have stayed away, hidden somewhere...

Santini moved closer, put both hands on Hawke's shoulders, and turned him around. He smiled gently, sympathetically. "Too wrecked to drive?" he inquired softly. "Okay, I'll drive. You just navigate." He pushed Hawke toward the passenger side, and climbed in behind the wheel.

Hawke grinded weakly; Dom always understood, and seemed to have a sixth sense about the things Hawke needed to tell him but lacked the courage or the ability to put into words. He opened the right-side door and paused, suddenly lightheaded.

"Well?" Santini prompted when he didn't move. "String? C'mon..."

But Hawke couldn't move. Both hands gripped the top of the door, and his head drooped. He heard Dominic's voice, but he couldn't respond.

"String...?"

It was as if that single syllable finally released him. He collapsed as if all his bones had suddenly turned to powder.

"String!" Santini scrambled to his side. "String?"

He heard the tap of Archangel's cane behind him, and looked over his shoulder.

"Is he alive?" the agent asked emotionlessly.

"Yes. But he's hardly breathing, and his heart's going like a runaway engine..."

"Let's get him aboard the Angel. The Firm can help, I should think."

"Yeah..."

Archangel helped get Hawke aboard the helicopter. Marella, the pilot, was still at the controls when she saw him. "God, he's a mess..."

"Yes." The senior agent took his usual seat. Santini sat in the rear, cradling Hawke's unconscious body.

"Destination, sir?" She started the engines even as she spoke.

"Twenty-nine Palms."

The answer surprised her -- and shocked Santini. "The Marine Corps base?" he inquired. "Why there?"

"Because we have operational agreements with them, and we can be sure nothing will leak from there. He'll be admitted and treated under maximum security."

Santini nodded, and was silent for the rest of the trip, lost in his own thoughts.

* * * * *

When they got back from the emergency room, Palmer went into the living room to give their prisoner the injection he should have received before they left. He stopped short. "Shit!" he whispered; then he turned. "Dr. Axelrod!"

"What's your problem, Keith?" The doctor was cranky, and his hand hurt in spite of the pain-killers an intern had administered. He'd spent the drive back to the house plotting the punishment he would mete out to Hawke for this insult. He entered the room -- and froze.

The chains lay empty and discarded on the couch. Their prisoner was gone.

Axelrod turned on his assistant. "How did he get loose? He should've been too disoriented to get free! Have you been giving him his shots on time?"

"Yes, sir!" The other man was emphatic. "Every six hours, round the clock. Yes, sir!"

The doctor considered Keith Palmer a fat slob who lacked the courage or the intelligence to lie, so -- much to Keith's relief -- he did not demand a detailed accounting. "Well, we were going to send him home tomorrow, anyway, so I guess he has simply saved us the inconvenience. Let's get out of here before he brings the Firm down on our heads."

"How? He can't communicate..."

"He walked out. He can lead them back to this place, if he can make them understand. Which should not be impossible. One must never underestimate the resourcefulness of one's opponents. I'm sure he won't be able to convey much more than that, however, and he'll be dead in two or three days, regardless."

Palmer was startled. "Dead? From what?"

Axelrod shrugged carelessly. "In the dosage he was getting, aphasiase is toxic," he explained. "I wanted to be certain he stayed disoriented. Apparently, that didn't work well enough. Get everything we need out of the house. I want to be gone in an hour."

"Yes, sir!" Palmer scrambled to obey, wishing -- not for the first time -- that he had the courage to escape himself. He thought about their prisoner, crippled by the primary action of the drug, fighting his way free, returning to his family and friends, only to be dead -- poisoned -- a day later. He shuddered, and deliberately averted his thoughts as he went about the evacuation plan.

Half an hour later, a silver Monte Carlo backed out of the driveway and disappeared up the

street. It was barely out of sight when the apartment building where Hawke had been held prisoner exploded. The fire department was on the scene almost immediately, but all they could do was keep the blaze from spreading to neighbouring buildings. There wasn't enough of the house left to try to save it.

The local news reported it immediately after the only mention of a blond stranger walking through Pasadena that aired before the police asked that it be removed from the reports. The Firm did not notice either report; neither did the conspirators.

* * * * *

Angel One landed on the roof of the infirmary at Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base. Archangel had spent most of the flight in communication with various people, so Santini wasn't surprised when a medical team met them on the roof and whisked the still-unconscious Hawke away. Doggedly, the older man followed, not noticing that the helicopter lifted off at once, bearing Archangel back to his local office on the other side of the huge base.

The senior agent and his aide each had work to do, and both went about it silently. Some hours later, Marella approached her supervisor's desk and waited diffidently, silently, until he noticed her.

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath. "Hawke received the aphasia drug by injection. Is that correct, sir?"

"The what drug?" He frowned.

"Hawke's condition, the impairment of the ability to use or understand speech, is technically called aphasia, from the Greek phania..."

"All right," he interrupted, cutting off the explanation. "Yes. His arm is laddered like a junkie's."

"This is, we assume, the same drug they intend to use on the town of Simsville? And, later, against Los Angeles?"

"According to their communication. You know that as well as I do, Marella. Get to the point."

"If we could deduce the method they intend to use to administer the drug, we might have a better chance of stopping them."

"You have to know something more about the drug for that, more than just what it's done to one man."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. The doctor is taking blood samples regularly, for analysis of the drug and its behaviour."

Archangel grinned. "I'll bet he feels like a pincushion."

"I doubt Hawke has any real awareness of it. I called Medical a few minutes ago. He has yet to regain consciousness. The doctor reports his primary concern now is halting the convulsions. He hasn't had much luck so far."

The senior agent stared at her, shocked. "Convulsions?" he repeated. "He was starved, exhausted..."

"...and drugged," she finished, her tone flat. "The doctor refuses to commit himself at this time, but there are several possibilities. It could be an individual allergic reaction, an unpredictable side effect, toxicity, addiction withdrawal. There's no way to know. Dr. Willard refused to speculate on Hawke's chances of living until morning. He says he's a doctor, not a soothsayer. I've requested hourly reports on Hawke's condition; he is presently listed as critical."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Marella spread her hands wide. "I just found out, sir." She spoke softly, understanding the distress in the man's eyes. "Sir, neither of us can help. We brought him here because we have confidence in Dr. Willard. Cluttering up his treatment room would only hinder him. Besides, Dominic's there."

"He must be half-crazy..." Archangel shook his head in grim sympathy.

"Our problem still remains, sir..."

He forced his attention back to the business at hand. Even if Hawke died, he had to find a way to save Los Angeles from these terrorists. "Have you gotten any reports from Simsville yet?"

She nodded, glad to be on a less emotionally taxing subject. "Christine reports the town is quiet and peaceful. It's a farming community, and visitors are rare. She believes there have been no strangers in town for a minimum of fourteen months. The townsfolk are enchanted with the concept of a visitor, as opposed to someone who stops for gas and directions on his way somewhere else. Her cover is that of a photographer searching for anachronisms -- new machinery in old buildings, and similar odd juxtapositions of modern technology and local traditions."

"Clever. Commend her for that choice of cover; it's very useful." Archangel leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled.

"Yes, sir. She has found no evidence of any recent intrusions. The storekeeper told her the last stranger through town was a government dairy inspector looking for the McMannis place, to which he was duly directed."

"How long ago was that?"

Marella grimaced. "He married McMannis's daughter, and they have an infant son. Sir, I think we must face the possibility that Simsville is a bluff."

The man sighed. "I am forced to believe you may be right, Marella. Of course, this anonymous 'they' may have intended to use Simsville and, for some reason, changed their minds."

"Or they intended us to watch Simsville while they set up shop somewhere else."

"How many little towns like that are there in California, Marella?"

Instead of her usual machine-like precision, she answered in tones of heartfelt dejection. "Too

many, sir. Far too many."

He brooded in silence for a moment, then gestured for her to continue.

She sighed. "The lab people are working on the drug analysis, top priority. We have to know more about it before we can speculate on how it must be administered. Most drugs that require injection don't work as well if inhaled, and hardly at all if ingested. Yet this drug, which was injected, must be presumed to work as well through inhalation or ingestion, or the threats to Simsville and Los Angeles are worthless. They can't inject hundreds or hundreds of thousands of people."

"We have no reason to suppose this is a vendetta aimed at Hawke, and therefore, we must assume the terrorists believe they can accomplish what they have threatened. I believe we may find some useful information by collecting data on any correlations between the two municipalities."

"That's your department, Marella. You don't need directives from me to run it."

"No, sir. But two things are immediately apparent. Simsville is extremely rural, and most of the residents have private wells; the town supplies no municipal water. Since I cannot imagine any method of contaminating food and having the entire city eat it, the only remaining possibility is aerially dusting the town. They would need a fleet to dust L.A.; the metropolitan area covers approximately three thousand square miles."

"That much?"

"A generous area estimate, ignoring population densities, from Santa Ana to Ontario, west to the coast, north as far as San Fernando. The point is, sir, that if they do have a fleet, even if it's composed of little single-engine crop-dusters, we aren't going to be able to protect Los Angeles without AIRWOLF."

"What good is AIRWOLF without Hawke to fly her?"

Marella understood. "Sir, Hawke is a virtuoso; no one denies that. But virtuosity isn't always necessary. Dominic Santini is a master pilot, and Caitlin O'Shaunessy is a talented journeyman at the very least."

Archangel shook his head. "Dominic won't leave Hawke, especially if the doctor is that pessimistic about his chances for survival."

"Then Caitlin could fly her, and I am familiar with the Electronic Data Command Centre..."

The man sighed wearily. "I'll call Caitlin, and see if I can convince her of the necessity of all this. You stay on the primary problem." He reached for a telephone.

"Yes, sir."

* * * * *

Caitlin worked the forest fire alone for ten days. The cameraman was efficient enough, and good at his job, but she hardly knew him, and she was terribly worried about Hawke. She received daily reports from Santini; they were always negative. No word, no clue, no sign of Stringfellow Hawke, who seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth.

Then, on the tenth day, there was no call, and she began to pray even more fervently than before that this meant he was hot on a trail, and could not take time to contact her. She hardly dared hope it might mean Santini had found Hawke.

She hardly slept that night, and tried to hurry breakfast. If he called, she wanted to be airborne; otherwise, half the camp would hear what they said. No one spoke to her as she ate, and no one commented on her haste.

She was alone in the chopper, warming it up, checking all systems, when Santini Air's frequency abruptly came to life in her headset.

"Angel One to Santini Three. Angel One to Santini Three. Caitlin? Do you read?"

"Santini Three to Angel One. I read you, Michael. What's up?" she inquired with studied non-chalance.

"Can you come home? We need you."

Her heart leapt in her throat. "I don't know," she admitted honestly. "We'll be done in another day or two..."

"It's important, Caitlin."

"What's going on? Have...have you found String?"

"Yes." His flat tone made her shiver. "But he is incapacitated. We need the Lady, and you and Marella may well be teamed with her. Dominic won't want to leave Hawke's side, and I'm not inclined to ask that of him."

"How badly is he hurt, Michael?"

He sighed wearily. "He will probably be forced to retire. If he survives, which is uncertain as of now. I'm sorry."

"My God! What happened to him?"

"I'd rather discuss this face to face. I'll pick you up at Ontario Airport, just give me your ETA."

"I'll have to tell the director. How much of this can I admit?"

"Tell him Hawke's been hospitalized in critical condition -- which is true. Dominic is alone, waiting... You must've shot that fire every possible way by now, anyway."

"True. Besides, it's practically out. Give me ninety minutes. If things go weird here, I'll call you on this frequency."

"Okay, ninety minutes. Out."

The director was sympathetic. Caitlin packed everything belonging to Santini Air, and made it to Ontario a few minutes early. The white Angel dropped to a landing a few rotor diameters away,

and Caitlin climbed out of her own craft.

Much to her surprise, Marella wasn't piloting the Angel. Archangel nodded a grim greeting. "Caitlin, this is Amber. She'll take your chopper back to Van Nuys."

She nodded. "I can fly this, so I assume you can handle a JetRanger."

Amber smiled and nodded. "Certainly. Any special instructions? Individual eccentricities of the chopper or the airport? Or the hangar?"

She was blonde, lissome, obviously a native Californian. Caitlin wanted to hate her -- and couldn't. "Just the fact that the door is locked. Here." She handed over her keys. "Good luck."

"Okay. Good-bye."

Caitlin climbed into the seat Amber had vacated, and scanned the controls. Satisfied that she knew her way around the cockpit, she took the chopper up. "All right, Michael. Where to?"

"Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base."

She was startled. "Why there?"

"That's where Hawke is being treated."

"For what? What happened to him?"

He told her everything they knew, which wasn't much, and she listened without comment.

By the time they reached Archangel's office at Twenty-nine Palms, the sun was coming up over the desert, changing it from dark desolation to blindingly bright emptiness, and Caitlin had herself firmly under control. She did not demand to see either Hawke or Santini. She left the Firm agent to his own work, and followed his instructions to Marella's office.

* * * * *

Lloyd's Corners was half the state away from Simsville, a leisurely two hour drive from Los Angeles. A small river ran out of the mountains and threw itself at the town. A hydroelectric plant eight miles upstream provided the community with power, and the town sold electricity to the state power grid; the income from the sale paid for the plant within ten years, and was now paying for the new municipal water pumping station that supplied the entire community with running water from their prized river. Lloyd's Corners was a prosperous, tight-knit little community, with an established tourist trade and several new light industries. It had a year-round population of approximately five thousand people.

Just then, several hundred strangers were in town, enjoying the hiking and fishing, camping in the mountains and coming into town every few days for supplies. The city fathers were negotiating with Anheuser-Busch, who wanted to build a new brewery upstream. The discussions centered around water flow and purity; upstream from the power plant was a six-mile stretch of rapids that fulfilled kayakers' wildest fantasies -- and that was under consideration for the Olympic Trials.

There were so many strangers in the booming little town that no one noticed the two silent men

with the small Winnebago who tanked up and headed out on Paradise Road. It paralleled the river as closely as terrain and ecological considerations would permit, and was the primary commuter route for employees at the power plant and pumping station, as well as the first leg of the commonest route up into the mountains.

Several townsfolk noticed when the silver Monte Carlo came into town and hardly slowed before hitting the trail up the mountain -- but they were too busy to notice much, and assumed the strangers in the Buick were going to meet someone else.

They were right.

Daniel Moreland and Lee Fontenot had spent their week exploring and watching the pumping station. They had the route down flat, and had implemented the first stage of the plan two days earlier. They gave Axelrod an efficient briefing when he and Keith Palmer joined them.

"It isn't just a pumping station," Moreland lectured; he'd been an engineering instructor at a junior college. "They call it that because the full name is too long for anything but the sign out front and the letterhead -- the Silver River Water Purification and Treatment Plant and Pumping Station, Lloyd's Corners, California. The locals just call it 'the station,' mostly. They all understand the reference, just as the Lloyd's Corners Hydroelectric Power Generating Plant is just 'the plant' to everyone."

"Yes, yes." The doctor was impatient. "Have you gotten inside yet?"

"Certainly." Moreland was scornful. "I told them I was from a small town in Oregon and that we wanted to use the Lloyd's Corners model for our own economic growth. The locals were so flattered they gave us a guided tour of every possible part of the station. We started two days ago. No one has taken any notice."

"And while the Firm is trying to protect the Los Angeles pumping stations from the possibility of terrorist infiltration and sabotage, Colonel Davies' little custom-built air force will be dusting selected sensitive areas of L.A. It doesn't matter how much they get, as long as the subjects are exposed to it steadily for the full one hundred seventy to one hundred eighty hours. Just think!" Axelrod leaned back in his chair and smiled. "No more inane television shows. We're going to hit Hollywood and the immediate surroundings first and hardest; most of the network executives are there, to say nothing of the actors who live and work there. By this time next week, they won't be able to communicate in any human fashion at any human level!"

Fontenot grinned. "I wonder if anyone will notice."

"The Firm will," the doctor replied positively. "And they'll put pressure on the Governor, so we'll get paid. We can pick off the little towns around L.A. one at a time until we get our money. Then we can all go live somewhere else."

"Sounds good to me," Moreland said with a nod. "Dosing this town through the station is simple. They have guided tours through the place every day. Just join one, and drop a packet into one of the settling tanks. They have no fear, and so are vulnerable. We dropped the first packet two days ago; we'll have to replace it today."

Axelrod permitted himself a wintry smile. "Their lessons in the reality of human nature are upcoming."

He pulled a small note pad from his jacket pocket and thoughtfully composed a short message. Satisfied with it, he tore the sheet off and handed it to Palmer. "Here, go back to L.A. and send this telegram the same way you did the first one. No slip-ups. When you're finished, come back here."

"Yes, sir." He took the paper and stuffed it into his shirt pocket without looking at it. "Right away?"

"As soon as you get there. But don't speed -- I don't want you picked up for anything, you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

He was just as glad to get away. He neither liked nor trusted Axelrod, and while the money had been good so far, he wondered if these fancy scientists would really be willing to split half a billion dollars evenly with an ordinary dip.

Keith Palmer was a pick-pocket; it was the reason he'd been recruited in the first place. When he stopped to get gas for the Monte Carlo, he went inside to buy a cold bottle of Coke and a candy bar; on the way out, he accidentally bumped into another customer. Reflexively, without his really deciding to do it, his very talented hand lifted the man's wallet, and dropped it into his own pocket. When he was ten miles down the road, he flipped the wallet open on the seat beside him.

Eighty-seven dollars cash, a California driver's license, and a sizable collection of credit cards -- various department stores, American Express, MasterCard, Visa, an assortment of oil companies. Perfect. Now, he wouldn't have to lift a wallet in L.A.; he could just pull over and make the call, using one of the credit cards, and then head back. He might even have time to stop for lunch. He was getting really sick of microwaved dinners.

* * * * *

Two hours north of Los Angeles, at an airfield hastily carved out of an alfalfa field, Colonel Jeffrey Davies happily paced around his chopper. This was the sweetest job he'd ever had. In the twenty years he'd free-lanced as a soldier all over the world, he'd never before had a job that offered so much emotional satisfaction. He'd arranged for Stringfellow Hawke to finally get his just deserts, and now, with this massive blackmail scheme working out perfectly, there was no reason to assume he wouldn't be stinking, filthy rich by this time next month.

He toyed with the notion of taking all the money, and cutting Axelrod and his handful of gophers out completely. But there was no need to be greedy. There would be plenty of money; half a billion dollars made lots and lots of millions, and he figured that most of the underlings would be quite satisfied with their twenty million each. He and Axelrod, as the commanders, would split the rest.

Of course, the money wouldn't buy happiness. For that, he had only to think about Stringfellow Hawke, speechless, ignorant of the spoken word. It was too poetically perfect...

Hawke had been a mercenary for a while, trying to get a line on his MIA brother. And since Hawke could fly circles around him, especially in helicopters -- which Davies never had and never would admit in public -- Davies was extremely jealous. The unit commander, Glenn Jackson, had known Hawke when they were both Shamrocks under Vidor in Viet Nam, and instantly put the newly re-

crusted Hawke in command of the Cobra squadron, demoting Davies to his wingman.

The operation was based in Thailand -- a wild flight into Cambodia, looking for American POWs. Like Hawke, most of the men were there for personal reasons, which was why the separate squadron leaders were all professional mercenaries. So when Hawke was given the Cobra squadron, Davies protested.

Jackson gave him the dressing-down of his life, right there on the field, and he had to stand there and take it. The entire unit was listening, which was bad enough; but right there, not thirty feet away, had been the slim blond figure of Stringfellow Hawke, impassive, uncaring, not saying a word, but seeing everything, hearing everything...

Davies had hated him from that moment, but Hawke made it worse during the mission by silently assuming the other man would still function loyally as his commander's wingman. The very expectation forced him to do it, since the entire squadron would see if he'd abandoned Hawke in combat.

The mission was a failure; no POW camp existed where they'd gone to look, and they had to fight their way out. Safely back in Thailand, emotionally and physically drained, the volunteers went off to drown their sorrows. A large group -- including Davies, Jackson, and Hawke -- ended up together in a bar.

Hawke was a gloomy person at the best of times; having just failed to rescue his brother yet again, he was positively waspish. But when Davies tried to pick a fight, he'd simply stared at him, through him, silent and withdrawn. Without so much as a word, Hawke had simply retreated, leaving Davies standing in the middle of a tavern -- with witnesses chuckling into their drinks at his discomfiture.

It was unforgiveable.

Davies had to concern himself with surviving, so when Hawke vanished from that underground life, he'd forgotten about him -- except when some of the witnesses, all of whom were mercenaries working the same circuits as Davies, retold the story.

It haunted him for eight years, while he sought the proper revenge.

He'd been aware of the operation when Mase Taggart and his crew stole the HX1 prototype, and found out about Hawke, his apparent reenlistment with the Firm, and his possession of the lost AIRWOLF. When he heard the chopper had been stolen from Qaddafi, he was willing to bet Hawke had done it -- for even in 'Nam, Hawke was a Firm agent. The story of the destruction of the HX1 by AIRWOLF -- in fair combat -- spread throughout the mercenary underground. Stringfellow Hawke was afield again.

And if he was afield, he could be reached.

Davies reached him.

He harboured fantasies of somehow finding and claiming AIRWOLF as part of his share of the booty, but L.A. would be a lovable jungle in a few weeks, and he also harboured fond thoughts of landing a big cargo chopper on Rodeo Drive and stripping the exclusive shops there. He didn't know where Hawke kept AIRWOLF, and refused to waste his valuable time looking for it. Without Hawke to fly it, it was no threat to their plans, so it could safely be abandoned, wherever it was, to rust in peace.

The inadvertent pun made him chuckle, and he went inside the hastily erected Quonset hut they used as a shelter. The eighteen other pilots were out with their choppers; he wanted all ten craft in one place as little as possible, so the locals wouldn't suspect. Most of the helicopters weren't designed for crop-dusting, and the add-on sprayers changed their handling characteristics drastically; his boys were out practicing.

He glanced at the boxes of the drug stacked along one wall, and shuddered. Horrible stuff. He was glad it took repeated exposure over a week's time to affect the brain permanently. Even so, the pilots were instructed to start their runs low and to end them high. The spraying patterns were designed to keep the choppers from flying through areas that another might have already sprayed. The stuff hung in the air like a fog when sprayed, but it was undetectable with specially calibrated instruments -- no smell, no colour, dispersed in a mist so fine it might feel like dew on bare skin. The perfect blackmail drug. The victims wouldn't know what hit them until the first symptoms appeared -- and by then, it was too late.

The Colonel chuckled happily to himself, and glanced at his watch. Time to head up to Lloyd's Corners; the good Doctor Axelrod insisted on performing one final experiment, and wanted the town dusted, so the airborne dose would be the symptom-activator for most of the victims. And, sensibly, he wanted to be evacuated by air beforehand. The helicopter would give him a good vantage point from which to study the onset of the aphasia epidemic.

Davies started up his Cobra and took off, still smiling. Five more days before they hit Hollywood. He was impatient to get on with it.

* * * * *

When dawn broke, the questing fingers of lemon-coloured sunlight found their way past a set of sheer curtains shielding an eastern window, and lit up a silent room in the infirmary of the Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base.

There were two men in the room. One lay, still and pale, on a narrow hospital bed; the other, an older man who looked even older than he was, slept in the room's single chair, which was pulled up close beside the bed. Neither man was a Marine.

As the room brightened, Dominic Santini stirred, and straightened in his chair, blinking at the light. He glanced at his watch; he'd been asleep for an hour and a half. He turned his attention to the still figure on the bed, and imagined he saw a small movement.

"String?" he called softly. But there was no response, and no further movement. His expression settled in sadder, older lines as the momentary hope faded. At least Hawke was alive. It had been a long night, filled with fear. The younger man had been incoherent, delirious; his convulsions had been frighteningly violent, and almost constant.

Santini shivered. He'd spent sleepless nights up with sick kids before. He'd spent more than a few with Saint John and String -- and that was always double trouble, because when one was sick or hurt, the other always suffered with him. He remembered teasing them about being the Corsican Brothers, about being the world's most disparate twins -- four years apart, and always several inches and a few pounds...

String had never caught up with his older brother. All their lives, Saint John had been taller, heavier, stronger, growing "old enough" first, and going away -- away to school, to camp, to

flying lessons, to solo, to the Army, to the Firm...

"But he always came back and made everything all right..." Santini whispered to himself. "Until the last time..." He shuddered, then shut up quickly when the quiet figure on the bed moved. He held his breath as Hawke woke up and looked blankly around the room.

"Hey, String, it's okay..."

The voice startled Hawke, who hadn't seen the other man, but when he turned his head and recognized his companion, he smiled tiredly. Moving slowly, as if every motion, however slight, was painful -- which was entirely possible, Santini realized, remembering the night-long series of muscle-wracking seizures -- Hawke reached toward him.

The older man couldn't resist that silent plea, didn't even consider trying. He leaned forward and took Hawke's hand, hiding his reaction to the weakness he felt there.

Hawke's smile began to fade sleepily, and he settled back into the pillow. He was obviously falling asleep again. "Sure, go back to sleep, kid. Everything'll be all right..." Santini spoke quietly, wondering if the other man could tell he was lying.

Hawke smiled again. "Sure, Dom..." he murmured, not opening his eyes.

For a moment, Santini was so startled he could neither move nor speak. Then he did both, excessively. "String!" he yelped. "String! Say that again! Say anything again!"

Tired and grumpy, Hawke opened one eye and growled, "Damn it, Dom..." Then he consciously realized what the other man already had -- the aphasia was gone. Slowly, a real smile dawned, lighting his eyes with incredulity. He sat up, leaning back against the headboard, his attention turned inward, seeking evidence of the change, proof of the nightmare.

"String...?"

"I'm all right, Dom," he reported, a little dazed by the truth of his own words. His own words! "I'm all right...!" He trembled uncontrollably.

"Hey! What's wrong now?"

Hawke shook off the reaction. "I...I was sure it was permanent," he stated the horror flatly. "One of the last things I understood him to say was that it was irreversible."

"Well, I guess he lied."

"Yeah...I'm all right. I am making sense, aren't I?"

Santini laughed at the anxious question. "As much as you ever have, String."

"And I can understand you just fine... I need to read something!" he demanded suddenly. "Anything!"

The older man pulled the clipboard off the foot of the bed. With studied nonchalance, he tossed it onto the bed, where Hawke snatched it up.

"Yes!" he laughed delightedly. "I can...read...too..." His glee faded as the words he was reading registered. He read the chart all the way through to the end, then looked up at his companion, who met his eyes calmly. "I think," he said slowly, "that I'm glad I don't remember any of this!" He looked down at his arms, saw the bruises left by the physician's assistant and by Dominic when they'd fought to hold him down. The needle tracks on his left arm were matched by others on his right now, from the blood samples the doctor had taken every twenty minutes during the night -- when the seizures permitted.

"I wish I didn't!" Santini was emphatic. "For a skinny little guy, you're awfully strong!" He paused a moment, then looked up and met Hawke's eyes. "You scared me, String. The doc thought you were gonna die."

Hawke accepted the love in that statement awkwardly, studying the bedcovers for a long moment. Then he took a deep breath to steady his voice. "Well, that just makes two people who are going to be real surprised to see me walking and talking."

"Which two? Michael's been getting hourly reports on your condition, and I've been here all along. The only one who doesn't know what's going on here is Caitlin. At least, I didn't call her. Maybe Michael did; he didn't say, but I haven't seen him since we got you here."

"I meant Dr. Axelrod, and the doctor here. I want to meet Axelrod one more time. Him and his flunky Keith..." His voice sank to a low snarl.

"Why? Especially."

Hawke stretched, and leaned back; he was tired, and he ached all over. "Axelrod had a little pocket microrecorder with him all the time, and he treated me like another laboratory experiment. He'd stand there, beside the couch they had me chained to, and dictate notes! And up until the last day or so, I was so high I couldn't even snarl at him."

"High?" Santini repeated, surprised.

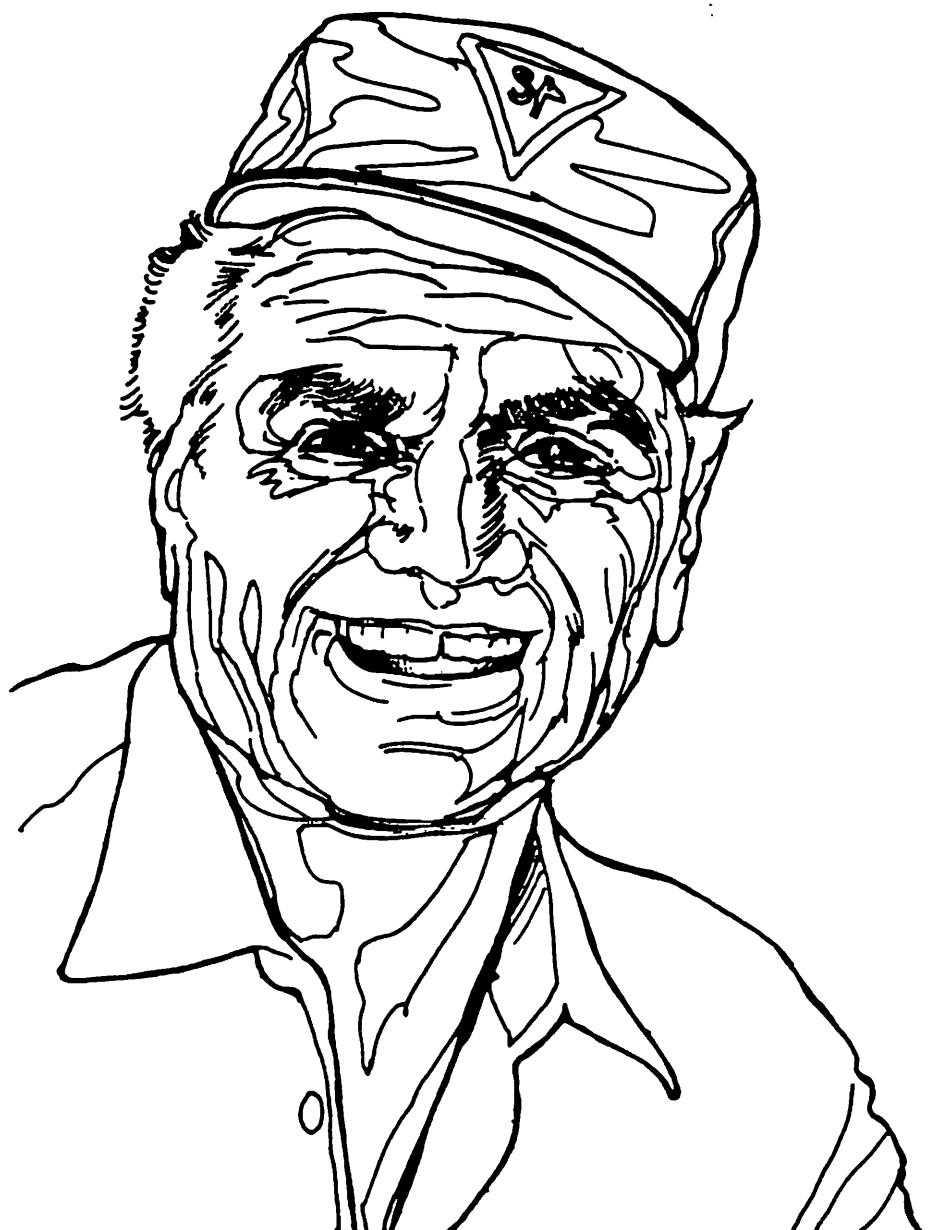
Hawke nodded slowly. "The world tasted like limes with sugar," he reported, his tone emotionless, but his eyes dark and haunted. "I was floating in a golden cloud. Gravity didn't affect me, the chains didn't bother me... Nothing mattered but whether Keith would come around with the next shot before the goldenness faded..." He shuddered, and looked down at the fading needle marks in his left arm. "It was...everything, Dom. I wasn't aware of time, or space, or the fact that they weren't feeding me..." He took another deep breath as he searched for a metaphor of sufficient power. "Dom, I think that if Saint John and Gabrielle had come in, hand in hand, I probably wouldn't've noticed. I know I wouldn't've cared."

"My God..." The older man was awed.

"Yeah. But it doesn't last. How long has it been, anyway? I couldn't keep track."

"Today's the twentieth. You were kidnapped ten days ago, and you showed up at the hangar yesterday afternoon... The police said they got reports of people sighting you from Pasadena, walking west, for about two days. So you were a prisoner for about six days." He tallied the days on his fingers. "Almost seven."

Hawke was startled by the length of time involved, but simply went on with his story. "When that golden haze finally faded for good -- and with every shot, it faded sooner; I guess I was devel-



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oping a tolerance for it, or something -- but when it faded, I couldn't talk or understand or read, and Axelrod and his flunky got downright patronizing. Finally, Axelrod came over and patted me on the head, like I was some kind of pet." His eyes flashed as he remembered his anger.

"What did you do?"

"I bit him." Hawke laughed, only then seeing the humour of it; his companion chuckled. "I was chained down, I couldn't've hit him. When he left -- I assume to get the finger fixed, 'cause I damned near bit it in half -- I finally got the chains off and got out of there."

"Any tactic that works is good tactics," Santini grinned. Then his expression turned rather sly. "How good do you really feel, String?"

The younger man shrugged. "Fine. I'm hungry, and thirsty, and I ache all over. I could sleep for a week. But I'm okay, Dom, really."

"Yeah? Well, try standing up."

Hawke shrugged an acknowledgement, and tossed off the covers. He stood up confidently, wavered a moment, then stood steady on his feet. "See? I'm okay, Dom. All I really want is breakfast."

"How about breakfast with Michael? He's going to want to grill you; this Dr. Axelrod you're so fond of is trying to hold the state of California up for half a billion dollars."

"Or?"

"Or he'll do to L.A. what he did to you."

Hawke froze. The prospect was too horrible to contemplate. He remembered his own helpless fury and frustration, and the difficulty with which he had restrained himself from violence. To imagine the millions of people in metropolitan Los Angeles similarly and simultaneously affected was to contemplate a nightmare of madness and terror.

"My God!" he whispered. He knew Axelrod was planning world-class blackmail -- but he never imagined it might be planned on so tremendous a scale.

Just then, the door opened. He whirled to face it, still on edge. The doctor stopped short at the sight of his patient on his feet.

"Dr. Harrison Willard, Stringfellow Hawke," Santini introduced them, grinning.

Willard was no fool. He studied his patient a moment, then stuck out his hand. "Mr. Hawke..."

Hawke smiled as he shook the doctor's hand. "I hear I gave you some trouble last night, Dr. Willard. But I don't remember it."

The doctor smiled back. "Be glad," he advised. "It was no fun at all for us; it was less fun for you. That's probably why you don't remember. I take it Mr. Santini has briefed you?"

"Yeah, and I read the chart." He tipped his head to one side quizzically. "Can you figure out why I can talk now and couldn't before?"

"Before what?" Willard asked flippantly. Then he shook his head. "Not off the top of my head, Mr. Hawke. What are you doing on your feet?"

"Standing," Hawke returned the flippancy. "I really want breakfast, and I've got to talk to Archangel as soon as possible. Will you let me out of here? I'm fine!"

"Not so fast, Mr. Hawke. Six hours ago, I wouldn't've bet an ice cream sundae on your chances of being alive this morning. You sit down right there. You're getting a physical before you get so much as a glass of water."

"I'm alive, I'm walking, and I'm talking," Hawke growled, his good humour fading. "If I fall down, you can come collect the body. This is important..."

"And your life isn't?"

Santini froze. Never, in all the years he'd known Stringfellow Hawke, had he ever dared to ask him that question.

Hawke's eyes were icy. "Not particularly," he said evenly. "Not compared to the lives of everyone in metropolitan Los Angeles. Aren't those millions worth a little risk?"

Willard stared at him. Then he sighed. "All right, all right. I suppose you'd like your clothes? Anything else?"

Suddenly, Santini laughed. "Yeah, thanks, doc. We're going to need a car and driver, too. We don't know where Archangel's office is, and this base of yours is too big to wander around on foot."

"Just call him," the doctor suggested, puzzled. "He's been anxious enough to know how Mr. Hawke's doing..."

"Oh, no! We couldn't do that! Michael's a very busy man! We'll just drop by his office and wave..."

Hawke laughed quietly. "Dom, you're incorrigible!"

Willard grinned. "His hourly status report is due. I won't send it. You'd get there first, anyway."

"Thanks, doc. You're terrific."

* * * * *

Archangel sat at his desk, staring at Marella's 0600 situation update. The Governor refused to believe the terrorists were serious -- and where would the State get that much money, anyway? Christine, his agent on location in Simserville, couldn't find any evidence there was anyone in town who didn't belong there. The chemistry laboratory was making no significant progress toward identifying the drug. And the last progress report from the infirmary said Hawke was still unconscious, but seemed to be holding his own, which was progress of sorts. His condition had been upgraded to stable, and he was off the critical list.

"Where the hell am I going to get the money to pay these lunatics, if we can't find them in time?" he muttered. "And why can't we find them?"

Marella shrugged. "The trail is cold, sir. I have found something new, however."

He brightened marginally. "Oh? What is it?"

"Well, the L.A.P.D. has records of a series of sightings of Hawke after he escaped and started back to Van Nuys. The first was in a lower middle class neighbourhood in Pasadena. The significance is that it's the only sighting in which he wasn't heading as directly toward Van Nuys as humanly possible, considering the handicaps under which he was operating."

"Oh? Go on -- I'm fascinated."

"He was headed southeast, but changed direction twice. If we assume he was attempting to lose a tail or confuse any pursuit -- I assume the drug does not significantly impair the intellect -- it would place his captors' base very near there. Approximately three hours after this sighting, a house not three blocks away exploded. There was nothing left. Fire department investigators speculate that high explosives or a large amount of propane contributed to the blast. It could not have been an accident."

"So the terrorists blew up the house when they discovered his escape," Archangel mused thoughtfully.

"So it would appear. The building was a four-unit apartment, owned by a corporation specializing in low-income housing. They were not inclined to be cooperative; I had to threaten them with the health department, building safety inspectors, and the I.R.S. But they finally rolled over."

"What did you get?"

She permitted herself a slight smile. "Three apartments were vacant; one was occupied. It had been leased to a man named Daniel Moreland. He was an engineering instructor at Angeles Valley Junior College until last semester, when he suddenly resigned. He associated with leftists who talked about terrorism; one of his fellow instructors says Moreland belonged to what he jokingly referred to as a terrorist fan club. Among the other members of this club is a biochemist specializing in cerebral proteins and enzymes. His name is..."

"...Dr. James Axelrod," a new voice interrupted from the doorway.

"Hawke!" Archangel gasped in undisguised shock. Marella froze at the sight of him. "You're... How can you possibly be all right?"

He shrugged, and walked into the office. "I don't know. Clean living and fresh air? Your guess is as good as mine. The doctor is still working on it. But I'm not all right, quite."

"What's still wrong?" Marella inquired hesitantly, refraining from commenting on how worn out he looked.

He sat down, weary from the trip across the base. "I'm hungry," he said plaintively. "The only thing I've had to eat in the last ten days is part of a Hershey bar. I'm hungry, and everyone just smiles and ignores me, damn it! I know I'm making sense; these are real words coming out of my mouth..."

Santini guffawed; Hawke glared at him.

Smiling, Marella went to the phone on the credenza and ordered breakfast for four, with no meat products.

Archangel couldn't decide whether to laugh or not. Finally, he shook his head, smiling slightly. "You're cured. I don't recall ever hearing that many words from you in the course of an entire day, Hawke, much less in a single paragraph. Maybe the doctor wound you up too tight, and you should go back and have him readjust you for your usual enigmatic silences."

"I'll readjust your outlook on life with a nine-pound sledge," his agent offered with disarming mildness. "Dr. Willard was great, even if he still doesn't know what it was he did so right. If anything. The aphasiase must've done this to me."

"The what?" Archangel and his aide both pounced on the word.

"That's what Axelrod calls the stuff. Just what's been going on out here? I haven't had a chance to get caught up yet."

Marella briefed him, and he nodded thoughtfully, his eyes vacant as he strove to remember what he had seen and heard while a prisoner. "Daniel Moreland's one of them. His partner's name is Lee...Lee Fontenot. I don't know how he spells it. Axelrod's flunky is one Keith Palmer. They're all Americans. So far as I know, there's just the four of them. Where did you say the second demonstration was supposed to be?"

"The township of Simsville..."

Frowning in concentration, Hawke shook his head. "No, that's just what they told the Governor. It's a blind, a decoy. If I think about it right, I can hear what they said over my head while I was drugged." He shook his head hard, as if trying to shake out the facts he wanted. "And if I can replay it, I can understand it now. My memory wasn't scrambled, just my hearing comprehension. Let's see... Axelrod was yelling at Keith for being an idiot -- which he was -- and finally told Lee and Daniel to leave... 'Take the camper,' he said, 'and...get up to...!' His voice trailed away. "Dammit, I can't hear the name." He leaned back in his chair and looked at Marella. "Tell me more," he suggested. "Maybe something you say will trip it."

"All right," she nodded. "Since you confirm Axelrod's involvement, there's no point in continuing with the possible justifications for considering him a suspect. Did you hear anything about how they're planning to administer the drug to the population of a city? Obviously, the method they used on you would not be practical."

Hawke was saved from having to answer; breakfast arrived. He sat where he was, enjoying the smells, while the Marine cook set up a buffet on the credenza. No one spoke until the Marine had gone.

"Well, you were the one who said you were starving," Santini teased.

The erstwhile prisoner threw him a crooked grin, and got up slowly. The food smelled wonderful, but he suddenly doubted whether he could eat. He settled for a small amount of scrambled eggs and plain toast, and went back to his chair. Marella served Archangel, and took a glass of orange juice for herself. Santini piled his plate high and settled down to eat it, completely

unashamed.

Just as they began to eat, the office door opened again, admitting a young aide. "Sir, the Governor has received another telegram." She handed the copy to Archangel and assumed parade rest at the side of his desk.

He scanned it quickly. "Damn! They admit the subject town is not Simsville, but do not say what town it will be. 'The choice will become apparent within the next twenty-four hours,' it says here."

Hawke swallowed. "That means they've been there for a week, drugging the people. It takes several days of almost constant exposure for it to take effect."

"Hey, String, won't they all be high, like you were?" Santini wondered aloud.

Archangel looked sharply at the agent, who shook his head. "No, Axelrod said the high only affects subjects who are injected."

"That may be due to the comparatively large amount of the drug and of its impact on the metabolism," Marella suggested. "Did he do any experiments involving inhalation and ingestion?"

"He said he did. He said they were injecting me because they wanted to keep me disoriented. They were afraid I'd escape."

"And you did, despite their precautions," Santini pointed out.

"Yeah."

"They told us they were going to release you," Marella said. "You were supposed to be the first demonstration that their threats were not empty. Then Simsville was to be next."

"Do you believe he can do what he claims, Hawke?" Archangel asked.

He considered the question carefully. "I know the drug works under controlled conditions," he said slowly. "Obviously, I can't know if it works any other way. But Axelrod believes it will. He was perfectly confident. He was even making jokes about how, this time next month, all the television executives in L.A. would be aphasic, and wondered if anyone would be able to tell. He's sure it works."

The senior agent nodded thoughtfully.

"No way to trace the telegram?" Santini asked.

Archangel glanced at the waiting aide, who shook her head. "No, sir. Just as with the first telegram, this was ordered by phone, and paid for with a stolen credit card. This one was stolen about two hours before the call was made, in a small town called Lloyd's Corners."

Hawke sat bolt upright. "That's it! That's where Axelrod sent Daniel and Lee! Lloyd's Corners! They've been putting the drug in the water at the treatment plant there."

"Lloyd's Corners? Where the hell is Lloyd's Corners?" Archangel demanded.

"Two hours north-northwest of Los Angeles, near Bakersfield," Marella answered. She glanced at the aide, who nodded, turned, and left. "We'll have a data pack in a few minutes."

"I can find it," Hawke stated. "Michael, get me a chopper, will you?"

"What for? You're in no shape to..."

"Just get me the chopper. I'm in no mood to argue."

It was a silent, tense duel of wills -- and Hawke won. The senior agent sighed wearily. "All right. Your driver will be out front. But keep in touch, will you?"

"Sure, Michael. Keep a clean-up crew on call. I can't see Axelrod fighting; you'll probably get custody of him, unless the Governor wants to shoot him."

"He just might, especially if I succeed in convincing him that the threat is real."

Hawke set his plate aside and stood up. The food was as wonderful as it smelled, and he felt more human now than he had in days he could not even estimate. "Oh, yeah, one more thing. Can you find out why they picked on me? I never heard of the guy before, and they specifically went up to the film site in the woods to get me, no one else." He frowned. "Axelrod knew me, sort of. He said he'd been advised that I was dangerous, and that he trusted his advisor. I'm real interested in knowing who this 'advisor' is."

"We'll work on it," Archangel agreed. "Oh, yes, do you want Caitlin? She's here."

Santini glanced at Hawke, who grinned. "Sure. Send her down to meet us."

"All right. Be careful, Hawke. We almost lost you once this week..."

"I didn't think you cared, Michael." Grinning wickedly, he left the office.

Downstairs by the front entrance, Santini went out to chat with the Marine driver waiting in their Jeep. Hawke stayed inside; the building was air-conditioned, and he'd already found the desert sun especially debilitating. He leaned against the wall, and wondered how long it would take Caitlin to get there. He had his eyes closed -- he was tired -- when he heard the unmistakable rhythm of her sharp-toed boots on the tiled floor. He waited until she had taken two steps past him -- he was around the corner, and she hadn't seen him -- before he spoke. "Caitlin."

She jumped, and he saw the marks of sadness vanish from her face as she recognized him. He felt a flicker of guilt; he was playing games with her emotions, toying with her, and it bothered him to find such a cruel streak in himself.

"String! Are you all right? Michael told me..." She shut up suddenly when she saw the slow way he moved. "You're not all right, are you?"

He grinned faintly as he pushed himself away from the wall. "Well, let's just say I'm immeasurably better today than I was this time yesterday."

"Was Michael making it all up? He said you'd been drugged, that you couldn't talk, or..."

"Caitlin." She shut up, rebellion still clear in her eyes. Smiling, Hawke shook his head, slid

one arm around her waist, and headed out the door. "I'll explain it all to you on the way to the Lair. It's a long story, but I don't think Michael exaggerated. There wasn't room."

Automatically courteous, he opened the door for her. She felt him sway as the desert heat struck them, and straightened a little. He was in worse shape than he would admit, but if he wanted to lean on her, she certainly wouldn't object!

* * * * *

Four hours later, AIRWOLF reached Lloyd's Corners. They flew over the town once, scanning for surprises. Then Hawke brought the wicked black helicopter down for a perfect landing in the visitors' parking lot at the water treatment plant. He and Santini climbed out, leaving Caitlin in the co-pilot's seat with the engine running, the rotor turning lazily.

A guided tour of the plant was scheduled to begin in a few minutes, and a small crowd had gathered at the door, mostly businessmen exploring the economic planning that made Lloyd's Corners so successful. The intense blond man in the grey flight suit effortlessly threaded his way through the crowd; one look at his expression was enough to convince the businessmen that they didn't want to attract his attention. His aura of suppressed violence was impressive enough that few of them even noticed the older man who followed along behind him like a bodyguard.

Inside the plant, Hawke paused long enough for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light. This was a reception area, with a beautifully tiled floor and a spectacular Italian Renaissance fountain that drew his attention. There was a faint citrus odour...

Stiff-legged, he walked to the fountain, as if approaching a grizzly's den. Puzzled, Santini watched as he touched a finger to the water, sniffing it warily.

Ever so faintly, Hawke smelled limes. He reacted violently, scrubbing his hand off on his flight suit, and backed away from the fountain.

"String?"

"Stay away from the water, Dom," he growled, scanning the reception area for either the manager or their suspects.

"Why?"

"It smells like limes. If you drink it, or inhale it, there aren't any warning side effects, remember?"

"Oh." Santini gave the fountain a wide berth. He'd seen how the drug affected Hawke; he wanted nothing to do with it.

"I want the manager of this place..." Hawke spotted a man in a grey pinstripe suit; he wore an identification badge that marked him as an employee.

"Can I help you?" the man inquired coolly. "The tour doesn't start for a few minutes..."

"Cancel it. You have to shut this plant down, right now."

The man -- his badge said he was Wm. Geary, Plant Manager -- stiffened. "I do not have to do

anything of the sort. And certainly not on the word of a total stranger."

Hawke took a deep breath, and tried to tighten his hold on his temper. "My name is Stringfellow Hawke. Call the Governor, and ask him if he hasn't received a ransom demand for half a billion dollars. If you do not shut this plant down, Lloyd's Corners will be a ghost town in a few days; the water is contaminated. It's been poisoning your townspeople for nearly a week."

"Our tests show no contamination. And there have been no complaints. You must be mistaken, Mr. Hawke. I think you should leave." He gestured to a security guard, who started for them.

Santini, a few steps away and ready to back his friend's play no matter what, saw the flash of anger in his eyes. Hawke would not give up; the plant manager's attitude was only a challenge. He kept part of his attention on the approaching guard.

Hawke's reaction to Geary's patronizingly supercilious tone was brutal and lightning swift. Before anyone could make a move to stop him, he grabbed the manager's collar in his left hand and held him tightly while his right hand held the icy muzzle of his automatic pistol under Geary's chin, forcing the man up on his toes. When he spoke, the words were soft as velvet -- and, somehow, far more intimidating because of that very gentleness.

"Listen to me very carefully. The water has been adulterated with a dangerous, possibly toxic chemical. If you do not shut this plant down right now, today, this minute, and drain all the holding tanks and reservoirs, I personally will blow your entire plant sky-high. Your choice. Make it. You have ten seconds."

Geary wheezed and choked, stammered and shivered and rolled his eyes, but Hawke's hold didn't loosen, and his face was implacable. "Five seconds."

"But...but...I can't!" the manager protested desperately. "There are families out there, small children..."

"They'll manage on bottled water. The alternative is death. Decide. Three seconds... Two... One..."

"All right!"

Hawke dropped him instantly, and lowered the gun, although he didn't put it away. "Call the Governor," he ordered. "You need confirmation and authorization. He'll send a disaster team, and trucks of water. Just tell him how long it will take to flush out your system from end to end."

The manager gaped at him. This was insane! No terrorist -- for such he believed Hawke to be -- would insist on organizing relief. "You mean this is real?"

"Of course, it's real!" Hawke snapped. "Now, I need to know if you've seen any of these people here at the plant or anywhere else in town in the last week." He took a folder from inside his flight suit and flipped it open. Four photos -- the four known conspirators' California drivers' license photographs.

Geary shivered, and bent to study the pictures. He blinked in surprise, and looked up nervously. "They've been our guests for most of the last week," he admitted. "This one, Dan Moreland..." He pointed to the proper photo. "...he's a politician from a little town in Oregon. They want

to pick our brains so they can try to emulate us. This one's with him, his name's something French..."

"Lee Fontenot."

"Yes, that's the name. I only saw the other two once, early this morning. I don't know their names."

"Okay." Hawke put the folder away. "Do you know where they are now?"

"I couldn't say. They were here this morning. Dan mentioned they were leaving soon. Perhaps they already have."

"Did you hear any discussion of their plans, their intentions or destinations?"

Geary frowned in concentration. "I think I heard the big man grumbling. He said airplanes were bad enough, but helicopters were for lunatics."

Hawke grinned mirthlessly. "Maybe that's true, but he'll regret the remark. Keith isn't very bright. All right, you call the Governor. We'll take care of these guys. Are there any scheduled helicopter services here? Or any helipads?"

The manager shook his head. "No. But I suppose a helicopter could land in most of the larger parking lots in town..."

The agent was honestly amused. "Of course. I landed mine in your visitors' lot." Before Geary could react, he turned on his heel and headed out the door, Santini trailing behind him. The security guard had retreated slightly when Hawke released the manager.

Back aboard AIRWOLF, the older man began both long- and short-range scanning. Hawke took the helicopter up gracefully, and began a wide circle around the town to facilitate the search. Caitlin monitored aircraft radio frequencies. Hawke called Archangel.

"Yes, Hawke? Any progress?"

"Confirm the contamination of the water here. I talked to the manager of the pumping station, but I'm not sure he believes me. Get the Governor to call him. The town will need water for several days..."

"The disaster plan is already being implemented. I'll call the Governor myself."

"If you can't get the idiot to cooperate, call me back, and I'll blow the plant to hell and gone."

Archangel coughed. "Isn't that a little drastic?"

"Michael, those people are on the red line right now! Once they start manifesting symptoms, it'll be too late, and that town will go up like Dodge City on Saturday night. There's nothing more frustrating than not being able to make someone else understand you, especially someone close to you. I don't know how close I came to killing a few people while I was heading back to Dom. And I knew what had happened; these people won't have any idea what's going on."

"You were under for seven days, and you recovered."

"I think I missed the last few doses. I know I should've gotten one just about the time I escaped. I cut it too close, Michael. Do you want to risk the entire population of Lloyd's Corners? That's over five thousand people."

There was a brief sigh. "All right, Hawke, you've made your point. What are you doing now?"

"Looking for Axelrod. The plant manager told me Keith complained about not liking to ride in helicopters. It sounds like they're planning on leaving town by chopper, and they couldn't have left too long ago."

"I've got a blip, String," Santini interrupted.

"Okay. Gotta go, Michael. Keep in touch."

"All right. Good luck, Hawke. Out."

Hawke turned AIRWOLF to her new heading, and they quickly caught up with the other helicopter. He was about to key his radio when a nasty thought struck him, and he grinned in his helmet. "Caitlin, challenge them for an ident."

She glanced at him, confused, then grinned as she understood. "Unidentified blue-and-white Cobra, you are required to identify yourself, by the authority of the Chief Executive Officer of the State of California, the Honorable George Deukmejian, Governor. Unidentified Cobra, you are ordered to comply with your registration and pilot's name. Over."

The chopper didn't reply. It continued on course as if it hadn't heard. It was unaware of the black Bell helicopter following it.

Caitlin muffled a curse, and repeated her challenge in slightly shorter form.

"All right, honey," a soft southern voice drawled. "You don't sound like Governor Deukmejian, though..."

"I never said I was he," she riposted tartly, annoyed by the patronizing tone. "He's in Sacramento, taking care of business there. I'm here. Your registration and pilot's name, please."

A soft chuckle. "My, my. Such a business-like attitude from such a sweet-voiced lady..."

"Just answer me," she growled.

Hawke frowned. That voice was annoyingly familiar... It wasn't Axelrod, or any of his three co-conspirators... He stiffened. Could this be his 'adviser'?

"Sure thing, little lady." The southern drawl faded a little on the registration numbers; there was a hint of military crispness in them. "And my name's Jeff Davies."

"Damn!" Hawke whispered. The name rang bells. He didn't want to fight Jeff; they'd fought together once. He was a good man. They'd never really been friends, and Hawke always considered the other man a bit too thoughtless in combat. But that didn't make him an enemy.

"Caitlin," he said quietly, "he's a mercenary. Ask him if he really thinks he can get away with Axelrod and the others when we know who they all are."

She blinked in surprise, and did as she was told.

"Of course you know who I am, little lady." The Georgia-peaches voice was still jovial. "I just told you. But those others? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" she temporized. Hawke told her what to say, and she relayed it with relish. "Would it interest you to know that the water treatment plant and pumping station in Lloyd's Corners has been shut down, and the tanks emptied and flushed? No symptoms have appeared, and now they won't. You've lost that demo, Davies."

"I really do not know what you're talking about, honey. But you're obviously parroting for someone else. Why doesn't he talk for himself?"

Hawke's grin was predatory. "Because," he said clearly, "I didn't want to shock the good old doctor into a heart attack. That's too easy a death for you, Axelrod..."

The blue-and-white Cobra bobbed sharply, then straightened out. The radio squawked rudely. "That can't be Hawke!" Axelrod squaled. "He's dead! He has to be dead by now, and he can't talk anyway...!"

The "dead man" laughed, deliberately goading them. "Oh, no. You aren't good enough to kill me, Axelrod. And aphasiase is only temporary in its effects. It wears off. Reasonably quickly, too." He didn't know if what he said was true or not, but it served its purpose; Axelrod shrieked like a weanling pig stuck in a fence.

"No! No! It's a fake! Hawke's dead! He's dead! He has to be!"

Davies' voice cut cleanly through the hysteria. "You unspeakable idiot. You promised he'd live aphasic! That's Hawke's voice; I'd know it anywhere..." Abruptly, communication from the Cobra ceased.

Hawke chuckled, honestly amused. "Another fancy scheme shot to hell, Jeff? You never were much in the planning department. Why don't you just land that bird down beside the Interstate there, and we'll wait for the police on the ground."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Hawke? Well, you can just go to hell!"

"Jeff, you can't get away from me. You may as well give up now, instead of when you run out of fuel. Bring it down."

"No! Just 'cause you killed Mase Taggart, you think I'm afraid of you? You're nothing, Hawke, nothing! Without that fancy AIRWOLF, you're nothing!"

This was ludicrous. "Jeff, this is AIRWOLF. Set your bird down, or I'll shoot you down."

"AIRWOLF?" Davies' voice was full of scorn. "You expect me to believe that? You've got a Bell 222A. Do you take me for a fool?"

"This is AIRWOLF," Hawke repeated coolly. "Do you want to die for your disbelief? Land!"

"No!"

"Dam, turbos. Deploy the ADF pod; give me the cannon and the chain guns." The words were clipped, short.

Santini didn't hesitate. "Okay, String, you've got 'em all."

"Clear." His thumb hit the turbos.

At approximately Mach 0.6, AIRWOLF screamed through the air toward the other helicopter, caught up with her, and passed her, skimming by only inches from the top of the Cobra's rotor. It bobbed violently in AIRWOLF's wake.

"That's your last warning, Jeff." Hawke's voice was cold as he swung AIRWOLF around in a pedal turn and headed back toward the slower craft. "Now, hit the deck!"

"You can go to hell." There was a definite click as Davies switched frequencies. Caitlin hunted until she found his voice again. "He's got a squadron!" she exclaimed. "He just ordered them to Lloyd's Corners for a punitive strike!"

"With what?" Santini asked.

"Probably aphasiase," Hawke said calmly, although he felt far from calm. "Though his chopper's armed, so I'd bet they all are."

"That's a funny-looking gun," Caitlin observed.

"It's a crop-duster rig," Hawke explained. "They planned on spraying Los Angeles. The guns are in front, under the body."

"Will the airborne aphasiase combine with what those people had already drunk?" she asked. The guns seemed inconsequential compared to the mayhem the drug represented.

"We have to assume it will."

"String!" It was Santini. "I've got eight...no, nine blips coming into Lloyd's Corners from the south. They're even flying in formation! It must be Davies' squadron."

"ETA to the town?"

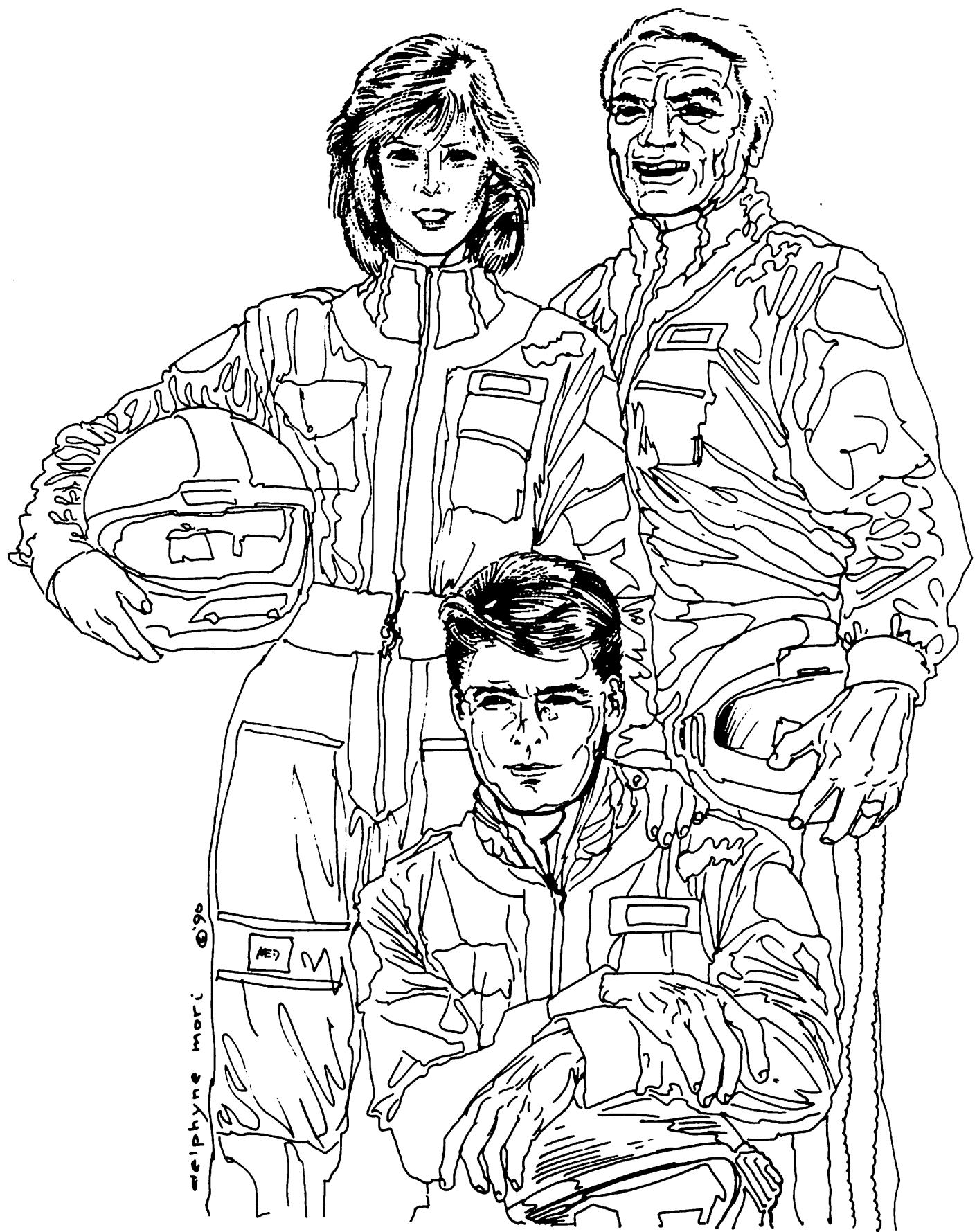
"They're there now!"

Hawke cursed under his breath -- he seldom did so aloud -- and whipped AIRWOLF around in a fast one-eighty. He hit the turbos, and the black helicopter raced toward the beleaguered town.

"What about Davies and Axelrod?" Caitlin asked.

"They can't get far," Hawke replied shortly.

In a few moments, they were back at the city limits, and didn't bother trying to talk these men down. AIRWOLF dove into the battle.



Caitlin found herself watching Hawke, marvelling at his prowess as a combat pilot. The nearest two helicopters -- the squadron was a motley collection of models and vintages, all wearing the same crop-dusting rig, and all armed -- tried to turn and fight, but they were too close to one another. Their rotors collided, and they fell. Hawke never even spared them a glance as he flew into the middle of the squadron to draw their attention from the town.

AIRWOLF's flight systems seemed an extension of her pilot's body; he didn't seem to operate the controls so much as wear them. He was AIRWOLF's fighting soul; incongruously, Caitlin found herself wondering if he could ever bring himself to surrender custody of the machine, even in trade for Saint John.

The black battle chopper dove to within inches of the ground, chasing a tiny glass-cockpit dragonfly, nailed it with one missile, and screamed up again through the smoke of its pyre to chase a white Hughes 500. Caitlin found that if she watched the way Hawke's body moved, she could anticipate the way AIRWOLF would move, and she could brace herself in time against the abrupt inertial changes of aerial combat. The Hughes exploded in mid-air when a tracer round from the 30mm cannon found her fuel tank.

Caitlin realized she was neglecting her own position. Hawke turned AIRWOLF in pursuit of a chrome-yellow JetRanger, and she dragged her attention back to her own board just in time. "Damnation!" she yelped. "High nine, and diving on us...!"

He turned slightly in response, and AIRWOLF moved, too. "Pressurize the cabin!" he snapped. The other ship, a dark blue Sikorsky, was too close to fire on; there was no time for any other response. The other chopper skimmed by just above their rotor.

"They didn't fire on us..." Santini's voice trailed off. Hawke was coughing. "String? Are you all right?"

Caitlin suddenly understood. "They sprayed us! String? Say something!"

He mastered himself with difficulty. "I'm...all right," he said thickly, and coughed again. His voice cleared as he spoke again. "Dom, is the cabin pressurized?"

"Yeah, it is now. Are you all right?"

"Fine." But he shuddered. For a moment, as that blue Sikorsky went over and he realized what the pilot planned, he'd been utterly terrified. He could imagine no worse fate than falling back under the effects of aphasiase after having once won free. Although he'd taunted Axelrod with the temporary effect the drug had on him, he had no conclusive evidence that it really was temporary. He might have been lucky, or there might have been any number of unknown contributing factors...

But there was no time now for introspection. He wheeled AIRWOLF around and gave chase, and the Sikorsky fled as a buck before hounds.

AIRWOLF's speed far outmatched the Sikorsky's, and the black chopper's chain guns shattered her hull. She fell like a downed pheasant, and burst into flames as she struck the ground. The remaining four helicopters gave up all idea of striking the town, and turned their combined attentions to AIRWOLF.

The two leaders -- a matched pair of older Hughes, both painted olive-drab and looking almost military -- exploded within a few moments of one another, their progress halted by a pair of Copperhead missiles. The other two tried to split up -- but Hawke was too smart, and AIRWOLF was too fast. The red-and-white Chinook was next to go down, and the yellow JetRanger tried to run.

AIRWOLF turned leisurely, and Caitlin heard the faint click as Hawke's targeting visor came down. He was in no particular hurry -- but the missile was away in a moment. Then the JetRanger was falling, smoking rubble fifteen seconds later.

"Yippee!" Caitlin shouted in delight. "That's the last! We saved the town!"

"Right," Santini agreed. "Now there's just Axelrod and Davies in that Cobra."

"Have you got them on the scope?" Hawke inquired. He raised his visor as he turned AIRWOLF yet again to retrace their course.

"No... I was too busy watching these creeps," the older man admitted. "Just head southwest; we'll pick them up. Like you said, they sure couldn't have gotten far. This fight took hardly ten minutes."

"Then where are they?" It cost Hawke a great deal to maintain that reasonable tone; he didn't want to yell at his friend, but he was altogether too close to breaking. That close call with the aphasiase was about all he could take; he'd been running on courage and will-power for days, and his self-control was beginning to slip.

"I'm looking, I'm looking..." Santini could sense his seething rage. Five minutes later, he sighed. "I'm sorry, String. I've lost 'em."

Hawke fought down a savage response; it wasn't the other's fault. "Well, we were kind of busy," he said quietly. Inside, he was raging at the injustice of it, that Axelrod should escape cleanly, and not suffer for what he'd forced Hawke to endure. "I should've shot them down right away."

"Let's keep looking," Caitlin suggested. "Maybe they landed, and we can find them by radar. Just keep looking..." She could see the faint tremor in Hawke's hands as he turned AIRWOLF to follow the Cobra's projected flight path, and wished there was a practical way to consult privately with Santini. After everything that had happened to him, it seemed utterly incredible that Hawke should apparently be adequately recovered, albeit weakened by his ordeal and very tired.

For his part, Hawke was feeling every moment of the past two weeks; he hurt in muscles he'd never known he had. The pain served one useful purpose, however; if he concentrated on it, he could stay awake. The war between pain and exhaustion was a fairly balanced affair -- if he failed to concentrate on the pain, he slipped into a half-doze that was dangerous; he couldn't fly in that state.

Dom certainly knew how he felt, for he had the telemetry read-outs on his panel. There were times when that tattle-tale bug in the flight suit annoyed Hawke intensely -- but this time, he supposed it was a good idea. He was fading, and knew Caitlin would probably end up finishing the trip home. Even now, he was in no condition to fly...

"String, I've got 'em!" Santini exclaimed gleefully.

"You sure?"

"There aren't too many civilians out flying their Cobras," the older man pointed out. "Turn to a heading of two-ten. They're a mile and three-quarters out from here."

As he turned the black helicopter, Hawke found himself waiting for another shot of adrenalin. The quarry was before him, and this nightmare would soon be over and done with.

But the expected and hoped-for jolt didn't come. There had been too much stress over the past two weeks. He simply could not respond. He blinked tiredly, trying to focus his eyes, and frowned. "Are they airborne, Dom? I don't see anything."

"No, they're parked. In that grove of trees down there, trying to hide."

"In the trees?"

"Yeah. Well, there's a house in there. They're parked on the driveway. It's just a hunting cabin, or something. It's not very big..."

"Doesn't need to be." AIRWOLF slowed. "No cars left the place?"

"Not as far as I can tell," Santini reported. He upped the magnification on his screen. "No tire tracks in the dust, either."

"Then we'll have to go down and take a look, won't we?"

The older man frowned. Despite the cheery words, Hawke sounded utterly exhausted. "Are you all right?"

The pilot straightened, squaring his shoulders. "Fine, Dom."

"Okay. Just worrying."

He could almost hear the other man's characteristic faint smile. "That's okay. You wouldn't be you if you didn't."

AIRWOLF descended, hovering just metres above the house. Hawke keyed the loudspeaker. "You may as well come out," he announced calmly. "You aren't going anywhere." To demonstrate the truth of his words, he pivoted his helicopter slightly, then launched one Redeye. The grounded Cobra exploded into a most satisfactory fire-ball.

There was no reply from the house. Hawke was suddenly struck by the futility of it all. He lifted AIRWOLF higher, above the trees, and punched in the scrambled radio frequency he used to call the Firm.

Archangel's voice was harsh with strain. "Hawke?"

"Sure, Michael." He leaned back in his seat, stretching. "Who else? Listen, I've got Axelrod and his gang holed up in an A-frame about half an hour's flight from Lloyd's Corners. You want 'em?"

"Certainly! And Dr. Willard is looking forward to testing the samples of aphasiase we found in the water at the pumping station. Can you bring them here?"

"No. I said they're holed up in the house. I found 'em, and I'll shoot 'em if I have to, but I don't get paid to be a ferret. Send the marines."

"Can they escape?"

"I could be offended by that question," Hawke said evenly. "Do you want 'em, or not?"

"Yes, yes, I want them!" He decided the pilot had lost his sense of humour, and kept to the business at hand. "How long have I got?"

Hawke shrugged, and checked his instruments. "I've fuel enough to stay here about another hour. If you're going to take longer, I'm going to need a tanker."

"All right. I think..."

The rest of Archangel's words were lost; AIRWOLF was jarred, brutally hard. She canted over to one side, and her entire hull vibrated on a high keening note, as if the helicopter herself were voicing pain. Hawke was nearly thrown from his seat, despite the safety harness; then he had to fight to regain control, for the ship trembled violently, all her usual stability gone.

The jolt had come from the starboard side, and Hawke wrestled with the controls. "Caitlin, can you take her? I think this side's not working right."

There was no answer. "Caitlin...!"

Santini interrupted him. "They've got a rocket launcher! We can't take another hit!"

His teeth bared in a snarl, his eyes alight with a berserker rage, Stringfellow Hawke nursed AIRWOLF around to face the A-frame. "Combat status?"

"You've got everything, at least according to my board," the other man reported. "I think that rocket hit back here; I may be getting false..."

"The hell with it!"

Santini looked up, startled, but before he could say anything -- even to comment on the chance that the ADF pod might be jammed -- Hawke launched a pair of Copperheads at the house. AIRWOLF rocked a little as the missiles raced away.

Then the A-frame went up in a pyrotechnic display worthy of Hollywood's greatest explosion artists.

Hawke watched the fire-ball mushroom up into the sky, changing from flame to smoke as it grew. He didn't move or breathe until the smoke began to drift on the wind. A gasp of pain from his co-pilot drew him from his trance, and he turned to look at her. "Caitlin? Are you all right?"

She reacted this time, turning a white, strained face toward him. "I...I don't think so," she admitted reluctantly, her voice level, but her blue eyes dark with pain.

"What's wrong?"

Her words came slowly, quite emotionlessly, but they trembled around the edges. "A rib, I think...and my wrist..." She swallowed. "The stick just seemed to leap...and I was thrown against it..."

Hawke looked more closely. Her controls were even more warped than his. Although even the rocket had not been able to breach AIRWOLF's boron and graphite-reinforced epoxy-composite hull, the transmitted shock had done serious damage to the cockpit. "Dam, course to the nearest hospital?"

"One-nine-seven. Don't use the turbos; they aren't aligned any more."

"Right." Using turbo-thrusters that were not in perfect alignment could tear the helicopter apart.

As AIRWOLF turned onto her new course, Hawke realized the radio was still open; Archangel was shouting into it. "...dammit, Hawke, answer me! Hawke!"

He keyed his transmitter. "Disregard my last message," he said quietly. "The situation here has been resolved with extreme prejudice. I repeat, terminated with extreme prejudice. Close the file."

There was a moment of silence from the Firm's end. Then the senior agent spoke quietly. "Was that absolutely necessary, Hawke? I know you had every reason to want them dead, but..."

"I could have let them finish knocking us down," the pilot interrupted. "AIRWOLF is out of service for repairs for at least a month, Michael. I'll call you when she's cleared for duty."

"What...?"

Hawke reached out, and deliberately turned the radio off.

* * * * *

Hawke was exhausted. He managed to stay awake long enough to get Caitlin to a hospital, then went home to bed.

After three days of sleep and a few good meals, he felt himself sufficiently recovered to go out to the Lair and start the repair work. He called Santini the first time he needed parts, and Dominic called the Firm. The equipment arrived immediately, and the older man joined him at the Lair.

Hawke spent the next seventeen days out there, working until his vision blurred, eating only when his body's demands became too overpowering. Santini neglected his business to stay with him for three or four days at a time, and they enlisted the recuperating Caitlin to be their messenger, running back and forth between Van Nuys and the Lair, sending messages to the Firm for parts and technical manuals, bringing supplies.

On the eighteenth day, Santini decided enough was enough. "That's it."

His companion looked up from where he was working. "What are you talking about? This isn't half done..."

"Sure, the Lady still needs a little work. You're done."

Hawke's expression tightened. "Dom, you've been a father to me all my life, and I'm grateful. For a father -- not a mother."

"Fathers care, too, String. You haven't had anything to eat since I got here thirteen hours ago, and I know you only slow down enough to eat when I'm here. You haven't slept in days; I can tell..."

"Dammit, Dom, I can take care of myself..."

"Yeah? Then prove it! Quit -- now. Go home. I don't want to see or hear from you for at least a week."

Hawke straightened from his crouch, and had to steady himself against the sleek black hull. "I'm all right, Dom..."

"You are not! String, you looked better when you came staggering up the street and fainted in my arms! Sure, we need to get the Lady fixed..." He slapped the hull affectionately. "...but you don't have to kill yourself getting it done. What good is she without you to fly her?"

The young pilot leaned against the tail assembly and smiled faintly. "You can fly her, you and Caitlin."

Santini relaxed, knowing he'd won. "Now, String," he said reprovingly, "you know we only fly her when you can't. She's your baby."

Hawke stepped away from the helicopter and studied her clean lines, automatically noting every scratch and dent that had to be sanded and repainted. He shook his head ruefully. "All right, Dom, I guess you're right..."

"Sure, I'm right. C'mon. I'll take you home, and I'll call you if I need any help finishing up. Okay?"

He was too tired to argue. "Sure, Dom. Whatever you say..."

* * * * *

After twenty-six days of hard work, AIRWOLF's flight crew deemed her battle-ready again, and they flew a grueling test run to prove it. Out of sheer perversity -- and a bit of exhilaration at the Lady's restored power -- Hawke deliberately penetrated the security perimeter at Twenty-nine Palms and buzzed Archangel's office. He didn't pause to see the agent's reaction, but went straight through the base and out the other side, a fighter squadron scrambling and hot on his tail. He let them follow for a few minutes, then ducked into a canyon and lost them.

Six hours later, Archangel and Marella appeared at Hawke's mountain cabin, where Hawke, Santini, and Caitlin awaited them.

Hawke and Caitlin solemnly flipped a coin to see who would cook; Caitlin won, and Hawke found himself with little to do. For a while, he kept occupied by filling wine glasses and tinkering with his stereo. Finally, though, he went outside to watch the sunset, not really caring if he

was being rude or not.

He wasn't much surprised when Archangel followed him all the way out onto the pier.

They stood there for a long time, on the far side of the visitors' white helicopter. Neither of them spoke. When the senior agent did break the silence, his words were barely audible.

"We found Dr. Axelrod's laboratory in Glendale," he said. "He was trained right, and kept very proper, very thorough records of everything he did, including all his experiments."

Hawke swallowed hard. "Experimental subjects?" he inquired, his throat suddenly dry. "Where did he get them?"

"Off the street, apparently. Most of them were adults in their early thirties; you fit into his typical sample. But there were a few older adults, and three teenagers. He even managed to latch onto a ten-year-old."

"And they're all aphasic?" The words nearly stuck in Hawke's throat.

"They're all dead," Archangel said shortly. "He conducted his experiments and, with all due and proper expedience, disposed of his laboratory subjects as if they were lab rats."

Hawke shuddered, and didn't speak. He'd been so close to that...

"According to his records," the senior agent continued, "there is a very sharp demarcation in the exposure gradient, for reasons he was not equipped to discover. A subject had to be exposed at a certain minimum level for at least one hundred seventy-three hours, or the effects of the drug were temporary. The maximum dosage was governed by the toxicity of the drug; at certain very high levels, the subject would succumb to the toxicity before minimum exposure was reached.

"The aphasic effects themselves began to manifest in injected subjects as the associated euphoria wore off. In inhalant and ingestion subjects, the effects manifested gradually, almost unnoticeably, over the last twenty-four to twenty-eight hours, until the minimum exposure was reached. Then the effects appeared in full force and remained indefinitely.

"He had no reason to believe the effect was permanent; none of his subjects lived longer than a month before he euthanized them."

He waited, but Hawke made no response; he didn't seem to react at all. After a moment, he continued.

"As his records indicate, and based on our understanding of what you reported, you were exposed for less than the minimum required time, although you were probably very close to the line. You may have missed only one or two of the last scheduled injections. If you hadn't escaped when you did, you would almost certainly never have recovered."

Hawke dragged in a single ragged breath. "What are you doing with all this data?"

Archangel sighed. "It is being stored, sealed deep in the archives, under a 'Top-Secret, Eyes-Only, Need-to-Know' flag. You'd need a 'Q' clearance to get into the room, and an 'F' to check the material out."

Hawke turned to face him, his eyes blank, his expression totally shielded. "Michael, I've had a 'Q' clearance for sixteen years. Can't you lock it up any tighter than that?"

The other man shook his head. "No, I don't think so. If we did, someone would get curious, and might go looking. This is a reasonably normal procedure, so it's fairly safe. It's all filed under 'Axelrod,' with no cross-referencing. We'll be able to find it if we need it, but it will be damned hard to find by accident. Since only the five of us know anything about it, I'm sure it's safe."

After a moment's thought, Hawke nodded slowly. He still wasn't happy, but it was true. You had to know what to look for, or you could never find anything in the archives of the federal government; the sheer size of the collection made it impossible. "I guess so. You're destroying all the samples?"

"Yes. Dr. Willard agrees with your subjective conclusion that it is rather impractical as a military device. We'll just store it in case some unique situation comes up..."

Hawke sighed. "I suppose..." He was glad no more of the drug would exist, but the fact that the data remained was a tiny mote of unease deep inside.

He tried to smother it, and failed; so he buried it as deeply as he could, and walked around his companion, heading back up the path toward the cabin. "Dinner's ready."

"How...?"

A moment later, Caitlin stepped out onto the porch to call them, and Archangel smiled, shook his head, and followed Hawke back inside.





"Share the Night"

(By Mary Robertson)

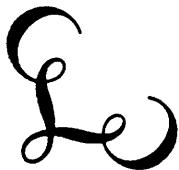
We share the night, we two,
Like lovers ill-accustomed to their roles
Who, still unsure, must hide within the Dark,
Lest Day reveal their souls.

For Day is ruled by those
Who do not understand the face of Night,
By those men ill-prepared to look
Upon the Dark and find the Light.

The shadows sing their fear
As once those shadows would have whispered mine;
But having found Night's soul, I see
In shadow naught but Love's design.

So we must meet Below,
Where Dark provides a safe, a secret place,
Where friends with clouded eyes need never fear
Your well-belovèd face.

My world lies out of reach,
However much I yearn to share its light.
But if the Day be lost, for now,
For ever, we can share the Night.





delphyne mori ©'90

"Writer's Workshop"

(By Rodney Ruff)

Stratfield scanned the scarred twilit surface of Cagliostro IV one last time, seeing the acrid smoke rising where the great Transmog machines had once stood, the machines that almost sucked the lifeblood from the world. Then he looked into Leanna's smiling face, and watched the wind blow through her sandy brown hair.

"Well, Steve?" she asked, brushing a lock of hair from her mouth. "Will you accept the Council's offer to be our advisor?"

He took her in his arms. "Are you sure you want an old space-bitten trouble-shooter like me telling you what to do?"

"I'm sure. I can't think of anyone else I'd offer the job to."

"Then I accept." He gave her a long, deep kiss that left them both panting great gasps of vapour. "Now, let's go inside. It's getting cold out here."

Technician and Councilwoman turned away from the barren vista and walked arm in arm toward the banquet hall. Behind them, the sun set on Cagliostro IV, the Alchemist's World. Tomorrow would bring the dawn of a new day -- and a new era.

Finished -- at last!

Walter Stock typed "THE END" on his computer screen, pressed CONTROL+S+=, and leaned back with a sigh as his disk drive whirred into life. Alchemist's World, the crowning achievement of his career as a science fiction writer, was finished -- and none too soon. His editor wanted the manuscript on his desk tomorrow. Fortunately, Walter had a standing account with Federal Express; as often as he used them, they'd probably send John Moschitta, Jr. in person to pick up his package and absolutely, positively send it to his editor overnight.

During his period of writer's block, he never thought he could write a book like Alchemist's World, not until someone told him he had it in him. During his inhumanly prolific period best described as writer's cramp, the story was still beyond his reach; he got glimpses and snatches, but could never quite put them together into a coherent story. He did, however, turn many of those glimpses and snatches into other stories, like A Shiggalon for Rashid and The Prince of the Power of the Air.

The plot for Alchemist's World finally came to him during a writer's workshop he conducted shortly after finishing his last book, Sandursah'nn Under Siege. When he wrote his editor with the news, she insisted he begin work on it immediately in order to cash in on the phenomenal popularity of Sandursah'nn. He wrote back saying he needed at least two months' rest after his recent troubles; she countered with the offer of a \$20,000 advance, half to be paid upon receipt of the written proposal, half upon receipt of the manuscript. And she wanted the proposal in two weeks.

Walter quickly decided he didn't need two months' rest after all; he knocked out the proposal in two hours. Alchemist's World was set on a planet that supplied the needs of galactic civilisation by means of giant transmutation machines that were slowly killing the planet to support an increasingly dependent civilisation. When his editor read the proposal, she immediately upped his advance to \$40,000 -- and also demanded that he finish the book in six months.

He reluctantly complied, even though he'd never written a book that fast under that lucrative a contract before. He wasn't used to writing under such pressure, and it showed. For the first two months, he barely scratched out the first fifty pages, and he was expected to write at least four hundred pages for this book.

He didn't do too much better during the next two months, either; he spent most of the time fighting with his insurance adjuster over the replacement of his computer monitor, stereo, video recorder, easy chair, and wall paintings, damaged the last time uninvited guests had dropped in on him. In the end, he had to pay for them himself, out of the royalties from Sandursah'nn Under Siege -- along with sharply increased home-owner's insurance premiums. He drove himself relentlessly the final two months, cutting out unimportant things like food and sleep to finish the book on time. He slept on an unmade bed; he looked like an unmade bed; he even smelled like an unmade bed. His eyes were bloodshot, his face looked like a striking surface for safety matches, and his breath could burn down the house if he sneezed in the wrong direction. He barely found time to spend the first half of his advance on upgrading his computer system; but, somehow, he managed, all the while still worrying about another attack of writer's block -- and even worse, another attack of uninvited guests.

But now, he was finished. All he had to do was print out the manuscript. If he'd had his way, he'd have sent it by modem, but none of the editors at his publisher's office had modems; they obviously thought writers should pay for their own paper. Grumbling, he threaded paper into his printer, adjusted it until the top edge was absolutely even with the printer guile, sent the printer mode selector switch to near-letter quality, turned the device on, and typed in the commands to send his story to the printer.

The writer then sat back to watch his manuscript print out, making sure his paper didn't jump out of the tractor guides and ball up in the machine. He'd have been quite content to sit there and neurotically watch the printer head print every line on the paper, except for one thing.

Walter had a date that evening. A blind date.

It had been arranged by his friend Stan, a comic book publisher he first met at Rathuffcon. Stan was always hounding him to do a graphic novel for him, but Walter always declined. Then, about a week ago, the comics man called to say a friend of his from New York would be in town to visit her family, and while she was there, would Walter like to go out with her?

Against his better judgement, the writer said yes. He didn't have much luck with women -- which was like saying the Ayatollah Khomeini was bad-tempered. He was attracted to women with the looks and brains of C.J. Cherryh -- but the women who were attracted to him either had the looks of C.J. Cherryh and the brains of a bing cherry, or the brains of C.J. Cherryh and the looks of C.J. the orangutan.

Stan's friend was different. She was a lawyer named Jennifer, and Stan said she looked just like Paulina Porizkova, only taller. That was just fine with Walter, even though it meant she was taller than he was. She'd called yesterday; she had a deep, husky, exciting voice, and also seemed to be friendly, out-going, and funny. She told him she'd drop by his place late in the

afternoon, and they'd decide what to do then.

Walter absently looked up at the clock on his study wall. "Oh, no! She'll be here in half an hour!" He jumped from his chair, ran to the bedroom closet, and hurriedly picked out a sport jacket, pants, and turtleneck sweater. Then, after grabbing clean underwear from his chest of drawers, he rushed into the bathroom to begin a frenzy of showering, shampooing, and shaving -- frequently interrupted by running back to his computer to change data disks and make sure his printer paper was still behaving itself.

He dressed quickly, gulped half a bottle of Scope, slapped his face silly with Aqua Velva, and combed three or four dabs of Brylcreem into his hair, blatantly ignoring the warning not to use more than one dab. If Jennifer really did look like Paulina Porizkova, he wanted to look as much like Tom Selleck as possible.

Then he took a good look in the mirror. Walter Stock would never be Tom Selleck, no matter how hard he tried. He'd be lucky to pass for Tom Kennedy.

Well, if he couldn't impress her with his looks, maybe he could do so with his writing. He ran to his bookcase and grabbed an armload of his books, then checked himself. The last thing he wanted to do to impress a beautiful woman like Jennifer was make her sit for hours reading Space Station and Limericks. But maybe she'd be interested in hearing about his new book.

His new book? He suddenly remembered his manuscript, still printing out in his study. Jennifer could wait; Alchemist's World had to be ready to go before he went out. He sprinted to the door of his study. The printer was quiet, so the manuscript must have finished printing out -- unless he'd run out of paper, which meant he'd have to fuss over both threading more paper in and figuring out at what point to start printing the rest of the manuscript.

He went to his computer desk, fearing the worst. The printer was empty.

He searched the area around it, thinking the paper had run out and fallen to the floor, but it wasn't there. Even though he knew he hadn't picked it up earlier, he still searched the places he usually put his manuscripts after printing them out -- but no Alchemist's World. He suddenly felt nauseous. His manuscript was gone!

Then the doorbell rang. Jennifer! He didn't have time to look for Alchemist's World, but he still had the data disks; he could print out another copy before they went on their date. She'd understand, if she were as nice as she seemed over the telephone.

He looked down at the duo-disk drive; the door to Drive #2 was open. He peered inside -- empty! The doorbell rang again, and he ignored it as he looked through the box of disks alongside his computer. The other disks were gone, too!

All that work -- gone! And his advance, too, unless he either found the disks or rewrote the entire novel in six hours. Not even Asimov could write that fast.

The doorbell rang a third time as he opened the door to Drive #1, hoping he'd put a disk there by mistake and could salvage at least part of Alchemist's World. No such luck.

He heard a knock at the door, but was too busy searching through his other boxes of disks to answer. With every box he opened, his heart beat faster, his palms grew sweatier, and he became more frantic. The knocking continued, growing louder as he scanned the labels of all his disks.

Alchemist's World wasn't on any of them. Where was it?

By now, the knocking was so loud that Walter thought Jennifer had taken a sledgehammer to his door. Jennifer! He'd better go explain things to her before she broke the door down. Before she broke it down? What kind of woman had Stan set him up with?

Walter raced to the door, his mind a jumble of emotions. He hoped Jennifer wouldn't be too angry with him for keeping her waiting. He hoped, once she came inside, that he could calm down enough to find his manuscript and get it on its way to his editor. Most of all, he hoped his editor wouldn't demand the return of the first half of his advance if he couldn't produce the book on time.

He reached the door, straightened his coat, patted his hair, swallowed nervously, and turned the knob. When the door opened, his jaw dropped.

A tall woman stood before him. Her irritated expression softened as soon as she saw him. She wore a one-shouldered pea-green dress with gold lamé trim; the knee-length fringed skirt was slit at the front of the left leg. She also wore open-toed silver high-heeled shoes and gold armlets, and she demurely held a gold clutch purse in front of her. Her height, the shape of her face... Stan was right; she did look like Paulina Porizkova -- except for one thing.

She was green. Her skin was green. Her shoulder-length hair was green. Even her eyes were green. And none of it looked like make-up. She was a big green woman. What kind of trick was Stan pulling?

Then she extended her hand. "Hello, Walter," she said, in the same husky voice he'd heard on the telephone. "I'm Jennifer. I'm your date." His jaw dropped even further. "Oh, close your mouth, Walter. I don't French-kiss on the first date. Besides, you'd probably choke on my tongue."

Ashamed, he closed his mouth, and swallowed hard. "Y...you...you're Jennifer?"

"That's right. Jennifer Walters. Stan's friend." She regarded him critically. "Say, you're kind of cute. Not exactly what I'm used to, but you're a lot better looking than Stan said you were."

"Uh, th...thanks," Walter replied, sweating. "You're not quite what I was expecting, either." Boy, was that an understatement! "Uh, look, Jennifer, umm, something has, er, come up, and I'm afraid I have to break our date."

"Oh, no!" she pouted. At least, Walter hoped she was pouting. "And I bought this dress just for this evening."

Her words hit a soft spot in his heart. "Well, I guess you can come in for a while." Or was the soft spot in his head? "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"Think nothing of it," she said, flashing a smile as she stepped inside the doorway. "Oh, and don't worry about your door. Just send me the repair bill."

"The repair bill?" he laughed. "I don't think..." Then he saw the large, splintered crack that ran diagonally across the door, and quickly stopped laughing. He looked up in shock at the green

woman, who put a hand to her mouth as if to say, "Oops!" He knew then he never should have told Stan about his previous uninvited guests.

He closed the door with difficulty, and led her into the living room. Jennifer looked around, taking in the decor with approval. "Walter, I am impressed," she told him. "This is some living room you've got here."

But not for much longer, he thought. "Thank you. The sales from my last book were pretty good." And the sales from Alchemist's World had better be terrific if what happened to the front door happens to the living room! "I'm a writer, you know."

"I know. I've read some of your books."

"You read science fiction?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure," she replied, spreading her arms. "When you look like a character from a science fiction novel, you might as well start reading them. I particularly loved the human-alien relationship in Best of Foes; you are good. That's why I let Stan fix me up with you. I guess you could say, in a way, that I'm your biggest fan."

True, Walter thought. From the looks of it, she stood about six-foot-seven, six-eight in heels. But if she read science fiction, particularly his stuff, he didn't care if she was fifty feet tall. The green skin, however, would take some getting used to.

Jennifer looked at the spacescapes on his wall. "Of course, Reed is a bigger fan of yours than I am. He's the one who got me interested in science fiction in the first place."

"Reed? Who's Reed?"

"Reed Richards. You know, Mr. Fantastic." He didn't know. "The leader of the Fantastic Four. I was with them for a while."

"What are they, some kind of rock group?" That might explain why his date was the colour of pistachio ice cream.

"A rock group?" Jennifer laughed. "No, silly, they're not a rock group. Granted, the Thing looks like a group of rocks, but they're not a rock group. The Fantastic Four. Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl -- excuse me, Invisible Woman now -- the Human Torch, and the Thing. I took his place while he was off on some other planet. Don't you know who I am, Walter?" He shook his head. "I'm the She-Hulk."

"The who?"

"No, they're a rock group. The Fantastic Four are a super-hero team, and I used to be with them. I'm the She-Hulk."

"But Stan told me you're a lawyer."

"I am a lawyer, Walter. Here's my card to prove it." She took a small business card from her purse and handed it to the writer; it was light green, with the words "Jennifer Walters, Attorney-at-Law" and a New York address printed in a darker shade of green. "Of course, as a member of the Avengers, I don't have that much time to devote to my practice."

"The Avengers? You work with that British guy with the bowler hat?"

"Not those Avengers, the super-hero team Avengers. You know, 'Avengers assemble!' and all that." He gave her a confused look. "No, I guess you don't know, do you? What did Stan tell you about me, anyway?"

"Well, uh..."

"Let me guess. He told you I looked like Paulina Porizkova, only taller, right?" He nodded. "And he didn't tell you Paulina Porizkova had to dip herself in a vat of green dye first, did he?" Walter shook his head. "I didn't think so." Her hands suddenly balled into fists, and her face contorted in a look of rage. "Ooh, that Stan! I ought to take his head, and just..." She concluded her sentence by making twisting motions with her hands. "This is the third time he's done this to me! He probably wants you to do a graphic novel for him, right?" Again, the writer nodded. "Just how hard up does he think I am?"

Then the green giantess looked at him more kindly. "Walter, you can order me out of your house right now, and I wouldn't blame you if you did. Stan lied to both of us, and if you don't want to go out with me, you certainly don't have to." She looked at him thoughtfully. "Of course, if you still want to, I'll spring for dinner. And the way I eat, you're getting a bargain. What do you say?"

"Well..." He considered her offer carefully. He didn't have that many women breaking down his door to go out with him, and he certainly didn't know any who'd buy him dinner. But then, he didn't know that many women who were green from head to toe, either.

"Why don't we sit over there on your couch and get to know each other a bit first?" the She-Hulk suggested. "Then you can make up your mind about whether you want to go out with me or not. I've been on my feet most of the day, anyway, and I'd love to sit down for a while."

"Well, I can't see any harm in that." He led her to his sofa. "Does anyone call you Jenny?"

"Just my dad -- he's the L.A. County sheriff -- and the Thing; he likes to stick a '-y' on everybody's name. You can call me Jen; most of my friends do. Or Shulkie, if you prefer." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Or you can make up your own pet name for me, if you want. Do you go by Walt, or Wally?"

"Just call me Walter. I've never had a nickname I really cared for."

"I guess we'll have to do something about that, won't we?" she replied, leaning back and crossing her legs. She turned toward him -- and suddenly the sofa collapsed beneath her, pitching both of them to one end of the couch and sprawling Walter in an awkward position on top of her. "Walter, are you trying to get fresh with me?"

He nervously pulled himself away and sat up as straight as he could, his hands in his lap; he was blushing. "It wasn't... I didn't mean to touch you like..."

"Don't sweat it, I was just teasing. I shouldn't have sat down so hard. Not everybody's furniture can stand up to someone who weighs six hundred fifty pounds."

"Six hundred...? You weigh six hundred fifty pounds?" She didn't look like she weighed more

than one-eighty, at most.

"Stan didn't tell you that, either, did he?" She looked at him squarely. "Well, I do, even if I don't look it. Here, feel my skin." She held her arm out to him, but he sat frozen in fear. "Go ahead, I won't bite. I might beat you to a pulp, but I won't bite."

He tentatively touched her forearm with one fingertip, then rubbed his entire hand against her skin. It was smooth -- but also incredibly hard, rather than the supple flesh he'd expected. "You see, my muscles are a lot more developed than yours, and my skin and bones are a lot denser. I can be hit with anything less than a mortar shell and not feel it, and I'm pretty much impervious to heat and cold. I could wear a bikini at the North Pole and not be bothered -- but don't get any ideas."

He did get ideas, but none of them involved her wearing a bikini at the North Pole. "How did you...uh, how...?"

"Become mean, green, and sexy? I got a transfusion of gamma-irradiated blood from my cousin Bruce Banner in order to save my life after I'd been shot in the back defending a client. I used to change into the She-Hulk in times of stress, but unlike my cousin -- he's the Incredible Hulk, by the way -- I kept my intelligence, and eventually I learned to change at will. Then, some time after joining the Fantastic Four, I was exposed to more radiation, and that changed me permanently."

She took a small brown wallet from her purse and opened it to a photograph of a woman with light brown hair and green eyes. "This is what I used to look like before I got 'jaded,' so to speak. At first, I didn't like it; back then, they called me the Savage She-Hulk because I snarled a lot and dressed like this." She showed him a picture of herself in a torn white dress. "But as I spent more time as the She-Hulk, I found I actually enjoyed my new self. I started dressing better, and I found myself spending more time in She-Hulk form. Most important, I learned to laugh at myself. I never could before." She put the wallet away and shook her head sensually. "Now, they call me the Sensational She-Hulk, and I like it."

Walter, however, wasn't sure whether he liked it or not. "But, surely there are disadvantages in looking...the way you do."

"Oh, sure, there are. It's hard to find decent make-up, for one thing. The Clarion computer tried to analyze my skin colour and blew up. But then, I'm the only woman I know who can wear brass jewellery without worrying about it discolouring my skin." She laughed, and, in spite of himself, Walter laughed with her.

"Clothes are another problem. Just My Size doesn't come in my size -- or my colour. Nobody makes a nude pantyhose for a green-skinned woman. I have to have most of my clothes custom-made, and the way I go through outfits, I need to be a lawyer in order to afford the bills. Sure, I've got special outfits for super-heroing, but I don't always have time to change when someone's life is on the line, and at my height, I don't fit in a phone booth too well." She showed him pictures of herself in various purple body-suits and calf-length boots. "I look like a lady wrestler there, don't I?" He looked at the pictures with interest. "You can have one, if you want."

"Thanks, I'd like that," he said eagerly. Then he looked up at her in amazement. "Did I say that?"

"You sure did, Walter," she replied, smiling back at him as she rubbed one leg against his. "So,

do we go out, or would you rather just sit here on your broken sofa and tell me how much you love me?"

"Jennifer, I...I'd love to go out with you," he began nervously. Did he really say that? "But I can't. I was working on a book when you came, and now it's gone."

"Lost? Stolen?"

"I don't know," he lamented. "I was looking for the manuscript when you came in, but I couldn't find it. And if I don't find it, my \$40,000 advance goes down the drain, and maybe my whole career with it."

"Ouch," the green woman said. "No wonder you kept me waiting so long." She put an arm around his shoulders. "If it means that much to you, I'd be glad to help you look for it. We can turn the whole house upside down." He gave her a look of horror. "Hey, I didn't mean it literally!"

"You'd really help me?"

"Of course, I would. I'm a super-heroine, remember? Besides, do you know how hard it is to find a decent date these days? I might as well go out with Dr. Doom. Most of the guys I meet are either married, jerks, or Skrulls in disguise." The writer had heard men called jerks before, but he had no idea what "Skrulls" were. "Let's face it, I intimidate men. Let's say you go into a singles bar, and you see a big green woman on a barstool checking you out. What's your first impulse?"

He hesitated at first, afraid of her reaction, then answered, "To run like hell."

"See, I even make you nervous. I like jocks, but most of them are too macho to relate to a woman who's stronger than they are -- although I don't know too many men who can lift seventy-five tons." Walter had no problem relating to a woman who could lift seventy-five tons; his problem was relating to a woman who could lift seventy-five pounds.

"When I was with the Fantastic Four, I dated a great guy named Wyatt Wingfoot, but I haven't found anybody half as good since we broke up. These days, I date mostly other super-heroes -- and most of them aren't that great as dates, either. The Human Torch always thought he was hot stuff, and the Sub-Mariner kept trying to get me into his hot tub. I went on a blind date with Daredevil once, and he insisted I get rid of my microwave oven because it interfered with his radar-sense."

She grimaced. "Black Bolt of the Inhumans was a disaster; the guy didn't say one word to me all night! Then there was Quasar. Ever try to have a candle-light dinner with a guy who glows like a one hundred watt light bulb? But the Punisher was the worst; he spent the whole evening talking into a stupid tape recorder. I should have known it was going to be a lousy evening when he picked me up in a delivery truck filled with semi-automatic weapons."

She paused for a moment, then smiled. "I've had a few good dates, though. Warren Worthington was a real angel. And the Thing is one of the most sensitive guys I know, although kissing him is like kissing a gravel road. Spider-Man was nice, but I made him so nervous that he climbed the walls all night. I kept hoping Cyclops would give me the eye when we went out, but he never did. Wolverine was the best of the lot, though; he's a real cut-up, with great animal magnetism, too." Walter shuddered, and cast a furtive eye at his easy chair. "Oh, do you know Wolverine?"

We've met, he thought, but didn't answer, so she continued. "Captain America, unfortunately, was a disappointment. I thought he'd make a great date; he doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he doesn't cuss..."

"So what was the problem?"

"He also doesn't chase women. His idea of a hot date was playing Frisbee with his shield. You have to wonder about a guy who tells you that you remind him of the Statue of Liberty." She leaned toward the writer. "Don't you see, Walter? I'm a woman. A big green woman, true, but still a woman. I have the same needs and desires as any other woman. I need to be hugged and kissed just like any other woman." She gave him a mean look. "And if you don't hug and kiss me, I'll break every bone in your body."

He jumped back in fright. "Of course," she continued with a smile, "if you do hug and kiss me, I may still break every bone in your body, but it'll be because I can't control myself. Now, what was it we were going to do?"

"You said you'd help me look for my manuscript..."

"Oh, right," Jennifer acknowledged sheepishly. "What's the story about?"

"It's called Alchemist's World, and it's about a planet that's slowly being eaten by giant transmutation machines."

"Oh, sort of like Galactus. Now, there's a guy I wouldn't want to go out with, someone who eats you out of house and home. I did go out with the Silver Surfer once, though. I got all dressed up for a day at the beach -- swimsuit, cover-up, sunglasses... But when he picked me up, I freaked out. He's the first guy I ever met where I could see my reflection in his chest." She patted Walter's leg. "But I guess you want to look for your manuscript now, don't you?"

"Well, uh, yeah, I do," he answered blankly. He staggered to his feet, led the way into his study, and sat down in the chair behind his computer. "I was printing the manuscript while I got ready for our date," he said, pointing to the computer. "When I came to get it later, it was gone, and so were the disks I had it stored on."

"And the back-up disks? You did have back-up disks, didn't you?"

"Yes, but they're gone, too."

"Maybe you just misplaced them. Let's take another look through all your disks." She took a box from the shelf above the monitor; he did the same. "Nothing here. You might want to check the disk files themselves; maybe you mislabeled the disks."

"I'll do that," he said dubiously, taking the box from her and inserting a disk into his computer. The drive whirred as the disk catalogue appeared on the monitor. "Nothing." He inserted another disk, and got the same result, then went through his entire disk collection twice. None of them had any part of Alchemist's World.

Jennifer looked through his filing cabinet for a printed copy of the manuscript, and quickly discovered that the main reason Walter had a filing cabinet at all was to keep his messes out of sight.

"Did you find anything?" he asked her.

"In that? I'd be lucky to find the manuscript for War and Peace!"

The writer immediately tore into his filing cabinet, strewing its contents across the room in a vain attempt to find his manuscript. "I'm ruined," he muttered, burying his head in his hands. "Completely, utterly ruined. I have to get that manuscript to my editor tomorrow, and there's no way I can possibly reconstruct a four hundred page book in that time. I'll have to give back the advance I received, and I can't afford to give up that kind of money."

The green-skinned lawyer picked up a paper from the floor. "Maybe you won't have to. This is the contract for your new book. Let me look it over; maybe I can find some clause that will give you an out." She started reading, then looked up. "If nothing else, you could do that graphic novel for Stan."

Walter haphazardly stuffed the rest of his papers back into the filing cabinet while Jennifer read the contract, making various suggestions as to how he should proceed the next time he made an agreement with his publisher. Suddenly, a loud discordant noise shook the house, making the windows rattle. "What was that?" the woman demanded.

"Those teen-aged boys next door, with their fledgling rock band," the writer fumed. "They call themselves 'Wyld Stallions' -- and the way they play, they should be run over by wild stallions. I can't stand..."

Before he could finish, the She-Hulk opened the window and shouted, "Hey, boys! Why not come over here and play?"

She closed the window, and turned to face an angry Walter. "Why did you do that?" he growled.

"I thought some music would take your mind off your troubles," she answered. "Besides, with all the help I'm giving you, I figure you owe it to me."

"You actually want to listen to them?"

"Why, sure, Walter. I like experimental music. After all, you know what they say. What kind of music does an incredibly strong six hundred fifty pound green-skinned woman listen to? Any kind she wants."

The doorbell rang. "That must be your neighbours. You go entertain them, while I finish looking over your contract."

Walter left the room, muttering to himself.

* * * * *

He opened the door to two strange-looking teen-aged boys toting equally strange-looking electric guitars and even stranger-looking amplifiers. "Mr. Stock?" one of the boys asked. He had curly light brown hair and wore blue jeans and a white crop-top, with a lavender jacket with black polka dots tied around his waist. "I'm Bill S. Preston, Esquire."

"And I'm Ted 'Theodore' Logan," the other boy said. He had straight black hair and wore cut-offs, a t-shirt, and a black vest; a bright orange jacket was tied around his waist.

"And we're the Wyld Stallyns," they both chimed in as they high-fived each other and shook their fists in a triumphant pose.

"We're sorry if our music bothered you before, Mr. Stock," Bill said. "We didn't mean to make you mad. That would be most untriumphant, because you're our favourite science fiction writer, dude. Could we have your autograph on one of your books, like maybe The Cast Iron Grotto?"

The writer sighed wearily. "Yes, I guess so," he said grudgingly. It was bad enough Jennifer had invited these dead-headed kids over without checking with him first; it was worse that they expected him to do something for them right away. Still, they were his fans, and he couldn't disappoint his fans. "Let me get a pen."

"Do you, like, have a copy of The Cast Iron Grotto you could give us, Mr. Stock?" Ted asked.

Walter gave them a dirty look. Maybe he could disappoint these fans. "Why don't you get set up in the living room while I see what I can come up with?" He went to a storage closet and pulled out a large cardboard box filled with copies of Pueblo Has Been Taken, which sold so poorly that it was remaindered within a week of its publication. If these guys wanted him to provide them with copies of his books, he might as well get something out of the deal, too.

He found a pen and quickly autographed the books, then returned to the living room to find it covered with a mess of equipment and cables. "Here you go, guys," he said, handing each an autographed book. "I didn't have any copies of The Cast Iron Grotto on me, so I hope you don't mind getting one of my earlier books instead."

"Not at all, dude," Bill replied. Then he turned to his partner. "Say, Ted, isn't this the book we tried to sell to raise money for our demo tape?"

"It sure is, dude. We've still got half of your garage full of copies. They're great for our acoustics."

Walter scowled as he surveyed the tangle of wires laid out across his floor. "I hope this stuff won't blow out my fuse-box."

"No way, dude," Bill replied. "We've got our own power source." He pointed to a large cylinder set up near the wall. "That's our portable nuclear generator."

The writer's face went white. "Nuclear generator?"

"Yeah, dude," Ted said. "We need that to power our alpha-wave enhancer."

"Your what?"

"It's the fundamental part of our equipment, dude," Bill explained, pointing to a large black box near the generator. "It gives our listeners a totally bodacious feeling that completely wipes their minds of all anger and hostility, and tunes them into their potential to be excellent to each other."

The writer looked skeptical. "Be excellent to each other?"

"Yeah, dude. It frees them to be super-creative dudes living in universal harmony," Bill re-

plied.

"Yeah, it zaps their chakras with visions of awesome tranquillity."

Somehow, Walter thought their claims were overblown. The only thing their music had ever zapped his chakras with was one hundred twenty decibels of noise. And if Bill and Ted were examples of "super-creative dudes," then Walter Stock made Olaf Stapledon look like a dime novelist.

"We're really grateful you let us come over, Mr. Stock," Ted told him. "But we always thought you didn't like our music."

"I don't. But my date does. She wanted to hear you play, and she's not the kind of woman you want to argue with." Not unless you're a Sherman tank, that is.

"Well, like, who's your date, dude?"

At that moment, Jennifer entered the room, carrying the writer's contract. "Walter, I think I've found something here that can help you out. I can't save your advance, but..." She noticed Bill and Ted. "Oh, hello, boys. I see you brought your equipment with you."

"The She-Hulk!" they both exclaimed. Excitedly, they turned to Walter. "Excellent, dude!" Hormones raging, they clapped him on the back in jubilation, then turned back to his date, drooling.

"That's a most savoury outfit you have on," Ted told her.

"Why, thank you." The green woman flashed him a smile. "You wouldn't be related to Tony Stark, would you?"

"She-Hulk, we have every one of your comic books," Bill said, pumping her hand vigorously.

"Oh, really? You're not fooling me, are you?"

"No way, She-Hulk," Ted answered.

"You'd better not be, or I'll come over to your house and rip up all your X-Men comics."

Bill looked at Ted. "She said she'd rip up our X-Men?" They stared at each other a moment, then joined in an air guitar riff and an "Excellent, dude!" Then Bill asked, "Gosh, She-Hulk, would you autograph our poster of you?"

"Sure, boys. I wouldn't want to disappoint my fans." She took a pen from her purse. "I'll wait for one of you to run home and fetch the poster, then I'll sign it."

"No need to wait," Ted said, pulling a long roll of slick paper out of his vest. "I've got it right here." He handed it to her, and she unrolled it to reveal a picture of herself, wearing jogging clothes and headphones connected to a platform in her right hand, on which she carried a four-piece band.

She autographed it, "To my excellent fans, Bill and Ted. With love, Jennifer (the She-Hulk) Walters," and handed it back. The writer regarded the boys sourly, envy turning him almost as green as his date.

"Oh, don't look so sour, Walter," Jennifer said, smiling. "You can have one of my posters, too." She put an arm around his shoulders and gave him a quick squeeze that pulled him off his feet, then handed him his contract. "Look at that paragraph. There's a clause that says if you fail to deliver the book on time, you lose the advance and must remit any part received. However, if you can produce the manuscript for Alchemist's World within two months after the deadline, you can still receive payment and royalties -- at a substantially reduced rate, of course."

He looked at the clause. It was a substantially reduced rate, all right; if it were reduced any more, his publisher could claim to be a vanity press. He hadn't seen a rate so low since he tried to find a publisher for Planet Without Mercy. He hadn't gotten any mercy then, and it didn't look like he was going to get any now. "What if I can't produce the manuscript in two months?"

"Do the words 'taken to the cleaners' mean anything to you?"

"Oooh, boy!" His knees buckled, and he would have fallen to the floor if she hadn't caught him. "I'm ruined."

"I'm sorry, Walter," Jennifer said. "I wish I could do more for you. Say, if you do that graphic novel for Stan, I'll see what I can do about getting him to advance you enough to cover your losses here. A good hammer-lock and dipping his head in a bucket of water a few times ought to do it. Other than that, I can't do anything to help you...except maybe take you out on the town. Dinner and dancing? I'll still pay for dinner."

The writer considered his predicament. His manuscript was gone, probably stolen, along with all the data disks he'd used in writing it. He'd have to forfeit the advance, which would seriously jeopardize his financial plans. He could salvage the book deal by reconstructing the four hundred page manuscript in two months -- working night and day for a payment that wouldn't buy him a Big Mac and fries, let alone cover his actual and psychological costs. He could recover his costs by agreeing to do the graphic novel -- but that meant spending another four months working on another manuscript right after spending an intense eight months writing the previous manuscript. Twice.

And he wouldn't be able to do any of it unless he went out with Jennifer. Her offer to pay for dinner was nice, but with all the pressure he was under, it had all the flavour of a condemned man's last meal. It didn't help that she looked like a Martian on steroids, either. He could turn her down, of course; his ego and maybe his reputation could survive the court battle that would ensue -- but his bank balance couldn't.

One factor, however, loomed foremost in his mind. "I can't dance."

"That's no problem; I'll teach you," the She-Hulk volunteered. "I'm not the world's best dancer myself, but when I get out on the floor, who's going to criticize me?"

"You can't dance?" Bill asked. "Definitely bogus."

"Most untriumphant," Ted offered.

Jennifer turned to the boys. "Why don't you two play some dance music for us?" She grabbed her date by the hand and kicked off her shoes. "Just watch my feet, Walter, and do what I do. Don't worry about stepping on my toes; I can take it. It's when I step on your toes that you have to

worry. Hit it, boys."

Bill and Ted revved up their guitars and launched into a raucous riff of mangled melody that vibrated vases, shook window shades, and left Walter's ears ringing for several minutes. At no time did he move, while Jennifer boogled to her heart's content. "Come on," she encouraged him. "Why aren't you dancing?"

"I can't dance to that! I can't even stand to listen to it! Don't you guys know anything else, something older?"

"Well, dude," Bill offered, "there's this triumphant classic tune that came out just last week..."

"That's not what I had in mind. Go look through my music collection. There must be something there we can dance to."

Bill and Ted went to Walter's stereo rack and thumbed through his record collection. "Lawrence Welk, Bobby Vinton, Vaughn Monroe, Wayne Newton... Totally egregious music," Bill said.

"Most untriumphant," Ted agreed. "Say, Mr. Stock, who's this Mel Tormy guy?"

"That's Mel Torme," the writer corrected.

"I used to date this judge who was a big Mel Torme fan," the She-Hulk volunteered. "Loved magic tricks and practical jokes, too. But there was this real sleazy prosecuting attorney in his courtroom who came on to me once, wanted me to give him a night he'd always remember. I gave it to him, all right." She jabbed the air with her fist. "First attorney I ever put in orbit."

She went to the stereo rack and took over the search. "'Disco Platypus,' 'Ultra Worse,' 'Funky Wagnall's'... Wow, Walter, you must have the entire stock of K-Tel albums in here. Ah, here's something!" She put a Little Richard record on the stereo, and soon the speakers were throbbing with "Jenny, Jenny." She grabbed the writer by the arm. "They're playing my song, Walter. Let's dance."

The She-Hulk started to shimmy; Walter followed along as best he could. "That's it! Keep it up; you're doing great!" his partner encouraged. Then she heard a loud wolf-whistle. "Why, Walter, I didn't know you had it in you."

"That wasn't me," he replied meekly.

She looked at Bill and Ted. "It wasn't us, either," Bill said. "That would be a totally heinous act."

The green woman shrugged her shoulders and started dancing again. Then a gravelly voice said, "What a luscious babe!"

The She-Hulk put her hands on her hips, and her face flushed the same shade of green as her hair. "All right! Who called me a luscious babe?" She glared at Walter, Bill, and Ted in turn; each nervously shook his head to deny making the come-on. "Well, somebody said it, and when I find that somebody, I'll..." She ground her fist into the palm of her other hand.

"You heard me?" the gravelly voice asked in surprise.

"I sure did, you sleaze-bucket!" She looked around the room, flailing her arms. "When I get my hands on you..."

"Cool it, gorgeous. You can't touch me, no matter how hard you try, although I wouldn't mind touching you under the right circumstances. Unfortunately, I'm a hologram."

"You're a what?" Walter demanded.

"I'm a hologram; name's Al." The writer looked puzzled. "What's the matter, pal, haven't you ever seen an invisible hologram before?" Al chuckled. "You can't see me or touch me. You shouldn't even be able to hear me, unless... Of course! The alpha-wave enhancer in the kids' musical equipment! It's picking up the frequency of my brain-wave link-up with Sam. No wonder!"

Bill looked at Ted. "Awesome! We could get this guy to be our announcer. Think what a gimmick like this would do for our act!"

"Totally outstanding, dude! Say, Mr. Hologram, could you let us speak to Elvis Presley?"

"Sorry, I can't; he's over at the 7-Eleven right now. Actually, though, I'm just as alive as you are. I'm an observer from the future. The only reason I'm here is because my partner Sam is somewhere in this time period." A loud chirp punctuated his remarks. "That Gooshie! I should have known he wouldn't forget about my sneaking off with Lucille at the project Christmas party."

"Who's this Sam you mentioned?" the She-Hulk asked.

"My best friend, and a really talented guy. Sam came up with this great idea for time travel, where he could exchange bodies with someone in the past. But something went wrong with the project, and now he leaps into other people's lives entirely at random. I show up every now and then to help him out."

Walter wished someone would show up to help him out. He had a missing manuscript, a green Amazon, two air-headed teen-aged rockers -- and now, a time-travelling Claude Rains. "This friend of yours, Sam... Is he nearby?"

There was a loud chirp. "Yeah, he leaped into the body of a rock promoter." Bill and Ted did a high five and waved their fists triumphantly. There was another loud chirp. "Or maybe it was the body of a claims adjustor." The writer's shoulders sagged, and his face drained of colour. "It's hard to tell; Ziggy isn't working the way he should."

Suddenly, a dark-haired man smoking a thick cigar appeared next to the alpha-wave enhancer. He seemed to be in his late forties, and wore black pants, a blue shirt, a loud red jacket, a polka-dot bow-tie, and a fedora with a polka-dot hatband. He held an object resembling an electronic address book in one hand, and whacked it several times with the heel of his other hand. "Come on, you bag of microchips!" The device chirped. "Ah, there we go. Sam's nearby, all right. Ziggy here also says you're Walter Stock, a science fiction writer, and that your latest manuscript's been stolen."

"That's right. Is Sam supposed to get it back?"

"There's an eighty-six percent probability..." The device chirped again. "Oh, great! On the blink again." He swatted the device, but without success. "I have no idea. The interference

from this..." He looked at the enhancer, then around the room, suddenly noticing everyone else's eyes were focused in his direction. "Can you see me?"

"We sure can," the She-Hulk growled, trying to cuff him; the blow passed right through him. "What the...?"

"Like I told you before, beautiful, you can't touch me. Unfortunately, I can't touch you, either, and that's too bad. We'd make an interesting pair. You're big and green..."

"And you'd be black and blue if I could touch you!"

"But you can't," the hologram replied sweetly. "Oh, well, I can always get Tina to paint herself green and dress up for me. One time, she dressed up as a gift package from Hickory Farms. I tell you, I never enjoyed bologna so much in my life."

Walter'd had about all the bologna he could handle. "Just how long have you been here?" he asked Al.

"If you're asking if I saw who took your manuscript, the answer is no. Sorry."

The writer turned from his visitors, went to his sofa, and collapsed on it, his head in his hands. Without the manuscript for Alchemist's World, his career as a writer was plunged into turmoil. He faced a future of slaving away on writing projects he didn't like, just to stay in debt and out of court. He'd hoped to do some travelling on the rest of his advance money -- but with what he'd have left after this fiasco, he'd be lucky to make it as far as the grocery store.

A large weight depressed the seat next to him, and he looked up into the smiling -- and green -- face of Jennifer Walters. "It's not so bad," she consoled. "You still have me."

Walter buried his face deeper into his hands.

She put her arms around him, her touch surprisingly gentle. "Oh, Walter, it's not so bad. You'll see." She patted his arm. "Hey, if things work out between us, I just might give you the only thing all men want from me."

He looked up at her, and shuddered. "W...w...what's that?"

"Free legal advice."

"Hey, pal, I wouldn't pass up a deal like that," Al declared.

"Party on, dude!" Bill and Ted added.

The writer sighed, and hauled himself to his feet. "Oh, all right. Let's get on with it." His future was already ruined; why not screw up his present as well?

"That's the spirit," the She-Hulk said, getting to her feet. She turned to Bill and Ted. "Boys, let's put some real dancing music on."

They complied, and soon Billy Joel was singing "Uptown Girl." Jennifer sang along as she danced, substituting the words "big, green" for "uptown." The teenagers fell in step behind her, while Al danced around the enhancer. Walter stood watching, and scratching his head.

"Oh, come on, Walter, dance!" Jennifer pleaded. "This is easy."

"Yeah," Al told him, "Tina and I do this all the time. I used to be a regular on a dance show when I was a teenager. Just watch me." The holographic visitor started to show off his moves, but as soon as he danced a dozen steps away from the enhancer, he disappeared. "See how easy it is? Just do what I do."

The writer was baffled. "How can I do what you do when I can't see you?"

"You can't?" The hologram suddenly reappeared next to the generator. "Boy, this is really going to cramp my style!"

Tell me about it, Walter wanted to reply. The music changed to a disco tune. "Come on," the She-Hulk invited. "Let's do the Bump." Before Walter could respond, she bumped him with her hip -- and sent him flying across the room; he narrowly missed the television set as he crashed into one of Bill and Ted's speakers. "Oops!"

The writer moaned as he rolled over onto his back. He could stop worrying about tomorrow; he'd be lucky if he survived that long.

The two teenagers quickly helped him to his feet. "Are you okay, Mr. Stock?" Bill asked, brushing off his clothes.

"Y...y...yeah..." Except for a sore jaw, a pounding headache, shooting pain in his side, and blurred vision, he was fine.

"Bogus move, dude," Ted said.

"Most untriumphant," Walter agreed. "Great! Now, I'm talking like them!" he muttered to himself as he walked away.

Then he heard a knock at the door. Now what? With a manuscript missing, and a giant green date, two teen-aged musicians, and a libidinous hologram all preventing him from looking for it, what else could happen to him?

He opened the door. Two men in dark suits stood there. One was of average height, with dark hair and beady eyes; the other was taller, with dark hair and not-so-beady eyes, and carrying a briefcase.

The shorter man spoke. "Mr. Stock?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Maxwell Smart; I'm with the government." He held up an official-looking pass, then gestured to his companion. "This is my associate, Hymie."

"Hymie?"

"My father's name was Hymie," the other man answered flatly.

"We're investigating the sales of certain computer disks," Smart explained. "We have reason to

think enemy agents have been sending coded messages on computer disks distributed in this area."

Walter's head swam. It might explain what happened to Alchemist's World... "What...brand of disks?"

"CompuMatic." Smart noticed the writer's apprehensive look. "Don't tell me you recently bought some?"

"Yes, I recently bought CompuMatic disks..."

"I asked you not to tell me that!" The agent looked around. "Can we discuss this inside? I'd rather we didn't stand around out here. It looks too conspicuous."

Conspicuous? If Walter's neighbours hadn't noticed a giant green woman trying to bash his door in, they certainly wouldn't notice two men in business suits standing there talking to him. "Well..."

"Please. This is a matter of national security."

He hesitated a moment, then sighed. "Oh, all right, come in." Another guest or two couldn't hurt, he told himself -- but he'd told himself the same thing the other times uninvited guests had shown up, right before he let them inside to ruin his life.

Walter led the newcomers into the living room, where Smart tripped over several of Bill and Ted's cables. The teenagers were playing along to a record on his stereo -- or, at least, he thought they were. "Boys, I'd like you to meet my new guests. Bill and Ted, this is Maxwell Smart and Hymie."

"Hymie?" Bill asked. "Egregious name, dude."

"My father's name was Hymie."

"Say, Mr. Smart," Ted asked, "are you a rock promoter?"

"No, but I can get you two a gig playing for Manuel Noriega." Walter didn't think that was such a good idea -- after all, there were rules against cruel and unusual punishment.

"Far out, dude!" Bill exclaimed, exchanging high-fives with Ted. "Just one question."

"What is it?"

"Who's Manuel Noriega?"

Smart rolled his eyes. "Your last name wouldn't be Larrabee, by any chance?" Both teenagers shook their heads, and the agent glanced toward one corner of the room, where he saw the She-Hulk dancing. "Who is that?"

"My date," the writer replied matter-of-factly.

Smart shrugged. "Well, I guess you are a science fiction writer."

Walter ignored the comment as he led the two agents over to the green woman, who was in the midst

of a conversation with the now-invisible AI. "...and while Tigra was throwing herself at any man who caught her fancy, the Wasp and I were just sitting there minding our own business. Then Rogue got drunk and started kissing everybody in sight, so they kicked us out."

"That reminds me of the time Sam leaped into the body of this male stripper. Boy, was he embarrassed! So was I, actually. Half the audience was composed of my old girl-friends."

"That's amazing," Smart said to his host.

"What, that she's green all over?"

"No, that she's such a great ventriloquist. I didn't even see her lips move."

"No, no, that's AI. You can't see him just now. He's a hologram."

"He's a what?"

"What's the matter, haven't you ever seen an invisible hologram before?" The writer grinned with satisfaction. "AI, Jennifer, I'd like you to meet Maxwell Smart and Hymie. They have a lead on what's happened to my manuscript."

"That's terrific!" the She-Hulk said. Then she stopped dancing and gave Hymie a head-to-toe appraisal with her eyes. "Say, Hymie, you want to dance?"

Hymie looked at Smart uneasily. "Max?"

"Go ahead, Hymie. It's all right."

The tune on the stereo changed to a fast-dancing song. Jennifer grabbed Hymie by the arm, barely allowing him time to set down his briefcase. "Come on, Hymie, get down!"

Hymie hit the floor with a thud.

The She-Hulk looked at Walter and Smart. "What happened?"

"I forgot to tell you," Smart said. "Hymie takes everything you tell him literally. He's a cyborg."

"So what's his religion got to do with it?"

"No, Jennifer," Walter explained. "That means he's a robot."

"Oh, well, that's no problem," she replied. "I went out with Machine Man once. Only guy I ever dated who needed an oil change every six months or fifteen thousand miles." She went to the fallen robot and held out her hand. "Get up, Hymie. Let's dance."

She led him through an intricate series of steps that, try as he might, he couldn't quite master. "Come on, Hymie," she chided. "Pick up your feet."

The robot bent over, grabbed his right calf with both hands, pulled -- and promptly hit the floor again. "No, no, Hymie, that's not what I meant. Get up, and we'll try it again."

Hymie stood up and followed her as she led him through another series of steps; this time, he did a better job. "That's it, Hymie! Now you're getting it! Just follow the music."

At that moment, the stereo speakers blurted out, "Shake, shake, shake... Shake, shake, shake..." Hymie stood and quivered violently. Then, as the record blared, "Shake your bootle... Shake your bootle..." the robot lifted his right leg and shook it.

"That's an, er, interesting step, Hymie," Jennifer observed. "Maybe I should give it a try." She duplicated his moves, then segued into the Funky Chicken while Walter and Smart looked on.

"Say, they make quite a couple," Al remarked. "I'll bet he won't fly halfway across the room when she does the Bump with him. Of course, she's supposed to be your date..."

Don't remind me, Walter thought. It was bad enough that Alchemist's World was missing, and worse yet that he'd been set up for a blind date with a large green woman who could easily break him in half -- if she liked him. But worst of all, her arrival was the first in yet another series of strange guests he'd never have allowed in his home under normal circumstances -- if there was still such a thing as "normal circumstances" where he was concerned.

But Al was right; she was his date. He should go to her and ask -- no, demand -- that she give him the next dance. He had the right...

But neither the courage nor the disability insurance.

The telephone rang, and Walter inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. "Excuse me, would someone turn down the stereo? I have to answer the phone."

"Don't bother," Smart said. "It's for me."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's my phone." The agent went to the sofa, sat down, and took off his right shoe. He raised a small latch in the heel, then removed the entire sole, revealing an earpiece in the heel and a disk over the arch that folded out to become both a mouthpiece and a rotary dial. The ringing stopped. "See?"

Walter saw. He knew about the latest advances in cellular technology, but he'd never before seen a portable phone like this one.

"Smart here," the agent said into the receiver. "Oh, hello, Ninety-nine. Yes, I've been reactivated again. Isn't it wonderful?...Yes, it's all classified, honey. I wish I could tell you about it, but I can't right now. I'll tell you when I get back...I have to let you go, honey, my field supervisor is coming soon...I love you, too, Ninety-nine...Ninety-nine, there are people here!...Oh, all right..." He puckered his lips and made a kissing noise into the mouthpiece. "Good-bye, honey." He folded the mouthpiece over the dial, replaced the sole, and put his shoe back on.

"Ninety-nine, huh?" Al commented. "Sounds like a really hot number to me."

"I should think so," Smart answered. "We're celebrating our twenty-second wedding anniversary in a couple of months."

"I've been married almost twenty-two years myself," the hologram replied. "Took me five -- or was it six? -- wives to do it; I've lost track. Why do you call her 'Ninety-nine'?"

"That was her agent number when we both worked for CONTROL. I always call her that; it brings back the old days."

"So what's her real name?"

Smart looked pensive. "I don't know."

"Yeah, I have that problem myself," Al admitted.

Walter looked at the agent. "You said something about your field supervisor coming here?" The last thing he needed was another guest -- but the way things were going, he was going to get one whether he liked it or not.

"That's right." He cocked his head, listening to the clatter of a helicopter. "That should be him now."

The writer ran to a window, and saw a white helicopter settling down on his front lawn. As the rotor blades stopped whirling, a man and a woman -- both dressed in white -- climbed out and headed for his front door. He went to let them in, but was beaten to it by Bill and Ted.

"Triumphant entrance, dudes!" Bill exclaimed.

"Yeah, we gotta make an entrance like that ourselves some time," Ted added, then turned to his partner. The two exchanged licks on their air guitars.

"Uh, thank you...I think," the man in white replied.

"Totally white outfits," Bill said, examining the newcomers' clothes. The man wore a snow-white three-piece suit, tie, and fedora; his cane, however, was ebony, as was the left lens of his eyeglasses. His hair and moustache were a greying blond, making him a dashing figure in spite of the fact that he walked with a limp. His black female companion wore an all-white skirted suit, and carried herself proudly.

"Yeah, whiter-than-white white," Ted agreed. "Welcome to the party, dudes!" Walter blanched at the mention of the word "party."

The man in white turned to the writer. "Would someone mind explaining what those two were talking about?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Well," the woman said, "I think they're a couple of totally bodacious kids who play truly excellent music." She gave her companion a knowing smile; he shook his head in amusement.

"You know," the man mused, "I sometimes think we should hire teenagers to write our codes. There's no enemy in the world who could possibly decipher their lingo." He extended a hand to Walter. "I'm Michael Goldsmith Briggs III."

The writer took his hand. "Walter Stock."



"This is my associate, Marella."

"We're here to investigate the passing of coded information on computer disks," the woman said as she shook his hand. "Is there a Maxwell Smart here?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." It was one fact he wished he didn't have, but it was his only lead toward getting Alchemist's World back. "He's in the living room with my other guests. You've already met Bill and Ted; I should warn you that the others are a little...strange."

"That's all right," the man in white said. "I've dealt with hundreds of strange situations in my time. This won't be anything different."

Oh, yeah? Walter led them inside. Bill and Ted, back at their guitars, were murdering another album by playing along with it. Al, standing next to the alpha-wave enhancer and calmly reading a racing form, alternated between visible and invisible -- in time with the music. The She-Hulk was teaching Hymie yet another dance step, and Smart was sitting on the sofa, making another call on his shoe-phone.

"Then again," Goldsmith-Briggs amended, "I could be wrong."

Smart hung up his phone and walked over to the new arrivals. "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream," he said.

"What?"

"I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream," he repeated. "What's the counter-sign?"

"Oh, the counter-sign." Goldsmith-Briggs put a hand to his chin. "Vanilla, chocolate, or tutti-frutti?"

"A double-dip tutti-frutti cone with a triple helping of sprinkles."

"Hey, dude!" Ted interrupted. "All that cholesterol is most heinous for your heart. You ought to have some low-fat yogurt instead."

"Do you mind?" Smart snapped. "We're exchanging passwords and counter-signs." He turned back to the man in white. "Well?"

The senior agent sighed heavily. "Never mind." He extended his right hand. "Agent Eighty-six?"

"Archangel?"

"Yes." The two men shook hands. "This is my associate, Marella."

The former CONTROL agent pointed toward a corner of the room. "And over there is my associate, Hymie." He called to the robot. "Hey, Hymie, come over here and say hello to Archangel."

His partner stopped dancing; he and the She-Hulk joined the others. "Hello to Archangel," Hymie said.

"Pleased to meet you, Hymie." Goldsmith-Briggs offered his hand, but the robot stood motionless.

"Well, Hymie," Smart said in irritation, "give Archangel your hand."

Hymie extended his right hand, grabbed it with his left, and twisted it in a counter-clockwise direction. Smart slapped his forehead. "No, no, Hymie! Give him your hand in a firm handshake!"

"Oh." The robot screwed his hand back into place, then grasped Archangel's firmly. The senior agent looked confused.

"I forgot to tell you," Smart explained. "Hymie's a robot. He sometimes takes things the wrong way."

"I know a few people like that." The man in white looked at the She-Hulk. "And who are you?"

"I'm Jennifer Walters, but you can call me the She-Hulk."

"I'm Michael Coldsmith-Briggs, but you can call me Archangel."

"No, I'll call you Michael," she decided. "I already know an Archangel, and I wouldn't want to ruffle his feathers -- especially not the kind he has."

"Whatever you say." He regarded her appreciatively. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Walter's date."

"Well, I'd say he has a rather...interesting taste in women."

"Thank you." She studied him closely. "Nice outfit. Must be difficult to keep clean, though."

"It is. That's what I have an expense account for."

"You want to dance?"

"With this leg?" He tapped his right leg with his cane.

"Oh, go ahead and dance with her," Marella said. "You weren't that great a dancer before you were injured."

"Oh, really? And how would you know?"

She didn't answer, just smiled devilishly.

"Well, then," he informed her, "you can dance with me -- after we've taken care of business." He looked around the room. "Now, then, the reason I'm here..." Someone was missing. "Wait a minute. What happened to the man in the red coat?"

"Oh, you mean Al?" Walter asked.

"Right here, pal," the hologram said. "You'll have to pardon my invisibility, but I decided to move in a little closer to hear what you were saying." He was silent a moment. "Say, Archangel, I like your taste in women."

"Thank you," Marella said before he could reply. "I'm sure I speak for all of Michael's assistants in accepting the compliment."

"You mean all of his assistants are beautiful women?"

"That's right," the black woman acknowledged. By now, her superior's face was beet-red.

"Well, where do I sign up for a job like his?"

"Yeah," Ted piped up, "I could go for a gig like that myself. Excellent, dude!"

The senior agent's expression changed from embarrassment to frustration. "Could we please get down to business? I'm here to discuss the matter of government secrets being passed on computer disks."

"Certainly," Smart said. "We traced Mr. Stock here as one of the buyers."

"Oh? Mr. Stock?" Archangel's tone was faintly accusatory.

"I didn't know anything about those disks until he came here," Walter protested, pointing at Smart. "And, besides, my disks were stolen just today -- with a very important manuscript on them!"

"Oh, really?"

The She-Hulk suddenly grabbed Archangel by the shoulders, picked him up, and shook him. "Now, just a minute!" she roared. "You're not accusing Walter of being involved in this, are you?"

"I'm not accusing anybody of anything," he replied calmly. "Now, would you please let go of me?"

Her anger abated, the green woman gently put him down. He straightened his jacket, then looked disapprovingly at the crumpled lapels. "I'll have to remember to ask for an increase in the Firm's Congressional appropriation..."

"What about my manuscript?" the writer demanded.

Archangel looked at him with considerable sympathy. "Mr. Stock, I'm sorry your manuscript was stolen. We do, however, know the groups involved in passing this information."

"You do? Then there's a chance of getting my manuscript back?"

"It's possible," the senior agent conceded, "but I can't promise anything. It's likely these people will destroy or erase the disks once they get the information on them smuggled out of the country. And even if we can get your disks back before that happens, we'd still be unable to return them soon. I hope you don't need that manuscript tomorrow."

Walter hung his head in sorrow. "Unfortunately, I do."

"I am truly sorry. I wish I could do more to help you."

There it was. Any hope of saving his advance for Alchemist's World was gone. There was an

outside chance he could recover the manuscript and thereby save himself the effort of reconstructing it -- as well as the lawsuit that would follow if he didn't produce the book. But it was a slim hope, and he was beyond the point of reaching for slim hopes. His only course of action was the one Jennifer offered.

Jennifer. She was standing next to him, her arm around his shoulders, surprisingly gentle. Surprised, he looked up, and was met by a warm smile. Even more surprising, he found his own arm reaching around her waist as he smiled back.

Then she spoke, her voice deep and sensuous. But she spoke to Archangel. "Michael, you said you know who's behind the theft of Walter's disks. Who is it?"

"Well, that's a bit complicated," Coldsmit-Briggs replied. "We believe the actual theft was engineered by agents from an organization known as KAOS."

"KAOS!" Smart exclaimed. "I should have known they'd be behind a scheme like this!"

"Actually, it isn't just KAOS. We had you reactivated because, as a CONTROL agent, you've had extensive dealings with KAOS. However, the KAOS agents were hired by another counter-intelligence and terrorist group -- F-E-A-R." He pronounced each letter slowly.

"Well, of course, it's FEAR," Smart said. "It has to be FEAR. Who else could it be but FEAR?" A puzzled look crossed his face. "Archangel, who is FEAR?"

Coldsmit-Briggs sighed, and shook his head. "Zeus warned me about working with you CONTROL agents, but did I listen?" He took a deep breath. "FEAR is a worldwide organization dedicated to the destabilization of world governments through the use of deceit, treachery, and the illegal acquisition of advanced technology and government secrets. As a matter of fact, an expert on FEAR is flying in to brief you. He should be here shortly."

Oh, no! Not another uninvited guest! Walter already had more of those than he could handle. He was ready to give up on Alchemist's World and take up residence in a cardboard box; it was about all he'd be able to afford after this debacle. He could picture vultures circling around his house, waiting to pick the flesh from his bones and the money from his wallet.

Absently, he looked out the window. He could actually see the vultures; the shadow of one of them just swept across the front lawn. It was a big one, too, as big as a man... As big as a man? He rubbed his eyes; his imagination was getting the better of him. But when he opened them again, the shadow had passed over Archangel's helicopter and was wheeling about.

The man-sized bird shadow passed over his lawn again; this time, a smaller bird shadow accompanied it. The writer cast a nervous glance at Archangel; from the other man's expression, he guessed he'd seen it, too. "What is it?"

"That must be Agent Randall. He was with Inter-Nation Security for a number of years, their chief agent in dealing with FEAR." He tapped his cane on the floor several times. "I should warn you. Ray Randall is -- how should I say it? -- different..."

Different? Different? Walter already had a green giantess, a holographic observer from the future, an excessively literal-minded robot, and a man who talked into his shoe. With "guests" like these, how could anyone possibly be described as "different"?

He was about to find out. When he opened the front door to admit the latest arrival, he was met by a tall man wearing a mustard-yellow bodysuit, black trunks, a jointed red belt, red bands around his wrists and ankles, yellow boots, a blue cowl with a black eye mask, a segmented gold necklace, and a golden helmet with a red winged starburst crest. He also had a pair of large bluish-white wings. A gigantic purplish-brown eagle perched on his left forearm; it wore a gold necklace with the same winged starburst crest. "Agent Randall?" the writer said hesitantly.

"Yes," the winged man replied in a deep, powerful voice. "But I don't use that name any more."

"What should I call you then?"

"BIRDman!" the newcomer shouted in an operatic baritone that seemed to have its own built-in echo.

"Say what?"

"BIRDman!" It made Walter's ears ring. "And this is my eagle, Avenger. I hope you don't mind the intrusion, Mr...?"

"Stock. Not at all, Mr...Birdman." By now, the writer was past caring who showed up at his doorstep, although he had to admit he'd never seen a get-up like this one, at least not since he'd judged the costumes at ReCon. "This way to the living room."

"Inside?" Birdman asked, seeming nervous.

"You have a problem with that?"

The winged man nodded toward the western sky. "It's just that I don't like to be out of the sunlight for very long."

"I'll make sure you sit by a window," Walter said sarcastically, then took another look at the newcomer. "If you can sit down, that is." He motioned for Birdman to follow, and led the winged man and his eagle inside.

As they entered the living room, the She-Hulk approached Birdman. "Say, I know you. Aren't you Hawkman, the DC super-hero?"

"Hawkman? You think I'm Hawkman?" the pinioned hero squawked indignantly. "I'm BIRDman!"

"Well, I'm the SHEE-Hulk!" the green woman roared back, loudly enough to jar the eagle from its perch.

"The She-Hulk. Yes, I've heard of you. A pity there weren't more super-heroines during my heyday." Birdman stroked the back of his eagle's neck. "This is Avenger."

"Avenger, huh?" the jade giantess replied thoughtfully. "You know, as a member of the Avengers, I think we have the makings of a lawsuit here." She noticed the winged hero's frown. "Just kidding, Birdie."

"Birdie?" he squawked. "Birdie?"

"That's right, Birdie, and you can call me Shukie. A lot of super-heroes today have nicknames.

Spider Man is 'Spidey,' and Iron Man is 'Shellhead,' and I won't tell you what we call Tigra. Maybe we can get together some evening and discuss how times have changed."

"I don't think so. I'm not much fun after sundown."

"Well, how about a dance?"

"Another time, perhaps," the avian hero replied. "I have business to attend to." He spotted Archangel. "Falcon Seven! It's been a long time!"

"Longer than you think," the man in white replied, shaking his hand. "I'm not Falcon Seven. Michael Coldsmith-Briggs III. Call me Archangel."

"You're not with Inter-Nation Security?"

"No."

"I guess it has been a long time. All one-eyed intelligence operatives are starting to look alike to me."

Bill and Ted greeted the costumed hero. "We're most tripped out to meet you, Mr. Wingman," Bill said.

"That's BIIRDman!"

"Say," Ted suggested, "maybe you could do the lead vocals for our next album."

"I don't think so."

"Yeah, I guess you'd probably go for stuff by the Eagles," the teenager chuckled. "Or maybe the Byrds." At the mention of each group, both boys performed air guitar solos.

The winged man shook his head. "I should give both of you a taste of my amaz-ta-flash."

"Hey! Special effects!" Bill exclaimed. "Excellent!"

Just then, Birdman's eagle flapped its wings and let out a loud squawk. "What is it, Avenger?"

"Probably me," a disembodied voice replied.

A large triangular shield of reddish energy materialized in front of the avian hero's left hand as he looked around the room. "Who are you? Show yourself! This solar shield isn't my only super-weapon!"

"The name's Al," the hologram said, becoming visible as he stepped in front of the alpha-wave enhancer. "Your eagle can see me no matter where I am; you can see me only when I'm standing here. Oh, and you can drop the shield. I'm no threat to anybody."

Warily, the winged man dematerialized his energy shield. "All right, I'll trust you...for now."

"That's a great costume you've got there, Birdman." Al pulled out his hand-held computer. "If you don't mind, I'll have Ziggy here make a holoprint." The machine beeped and gurgled. "There.

Tina's been after me to start dressing up for our encounters. She has this fetish about men with wings."

Birdman shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I've been out of circulation too long."

Tell me about it, Walter thought. I was never in circulation.

Archangel took the winged man by the upper arm. "Birdman, I'd like you to meet Maxwell Smart of CONTROL," he said, leading the avian hero over to the reactivated agent. "Maxwell Smart, this is Birdman of Inter-Nation Security." The two men shook hands. "Max, this is our expert on FEAR."

"Pleased to meet you, I think," Smart said, looking over the winged man's costume. "I'll bet you never have to worry about missing your flight."

"No, I don't," Birdman replied, chuckling.

Coldsmith-Briggs stepped between them. "Well, now that everyone's here, we can discuss what the KAOS/FEAR alliance is up to. I'll begin by..."

"Not so fast, Archangel," the CONTROL agent interrupted. "This doesn't look like a secure area." You've got that right, Walter thought. "I insist we hold our discussion under the Cone of Silence."

"Under the what?" the man in white asked.

"The Cone of Silence. A sound-absorbing device we used at CONTROL headquarters whenever we discussed matters of top security."

"May I remind you that we are not at CONTROL headquarters?"

"Precisely." Smart picked up the briefcase that had been sitting alongside the sofa. "That's why I brought along the new field model, the Inflatable Cone of Silence." He unlatched the briefcase. "Inside this case is a fully inflatable sphere of reinforced plastic that will completely absorb the sound of even the loudest noise made inside it. It's the perfect chamber for secrecy."

Walter looked at the briefcase with interest. If it did what the CONTROL agent claimed, he'd buy it -- then stick Bill and Ted inside so he wouldn't be disturbed by their practicing.

Smart opened the briefcase; a large white balloon spilled out, inflating so rapidly that it knocked the case out of the agent's hands. Within seconds, the balloon became transparent, and expanded to fill the centre of the room. And it was still growing.

"Uh, Max, where's the opening to this thing?" Archangel asked.

"The opening? Ah, yes, the opening... Well, Dr. Steele did say there was one bug they hadn't gotten ironed out yet..."

"Bogus!" Bill and Ted both shouted, scrambling out of the path of the mushrooming Cone of Silence. Everyone else did the same, except Al, who stood inside the balloon chamber, saying something no one else could hear. But there was no escape from the expanding bubble. It soon filled the living room, plastering Walter and all his guests -- except Al -- against the walls.

Suddenly, a popping noise mingled with the cry of an eagle -- and the Cone of Silence began to deflate.

"Good work, Avenger!" a shaken Birdman exclaimed as he peeled himself from the wall and inspected his wings for damage.

The plastic bubble deflated as rapidly as it had inflated. The outrushing air turned it -- and the briefcase attached to it -- into an unguided missile that flew around the room. Fortunately, it missed Walter's lamps and television set; unfortunately, it also missed Bill and Ted's musical equipment.

At last, the flying missile headed straight toward the writer. "My solar beam will stop it!" Birdman declared; a yellow beam stabbed out from his right hand and exploded the briefcase just before it hit.

Coldsmith-Briggs and Marella dusted each other off. Then the senior agent turned to Smart. "Of all the idiotic devices I have ever seen, that was the most ridiculous, the most stupid of all!" he lambasted the wincing CONTROL man. "Not only did it fail to work, but it almost injured someone! Now, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Sorry about that, Archangel." The other man looked contrite.

The man in white glared angrily for a moment. "All right, then, shall we get down to business?" he demanded at last.

The government agents and Birdman began a detailed discussion of KAOS, FEAR, and the black market for high-tech weaponry; Walter and the others looked on with varying degrees of interest. The writer had already given up all hope of ever seeing Alchemist's World again; but if the person or persons who'd taken it could be caught, he'd derive some satisfaction from that.

"And so," Archangel concluded at last, "we're dealing here with an alliance of two cold-blooded, calculating organizations that will stop at nothing in their plans for world domination. You'll be facing deadly dangers each and every step of the way."

"And," Smart added emphatically, "loving it!"

The man in white sighed. "Never before have I worked with such a motley crew..."

"Motley Cruel!" Bill and Ted exclaimed, exchanging air guitar riffs.

Archangel wanted to leave. Walter wanted to join him. The She-Hulk, however, had other ideas. She put a hand on the writer's shoulder. "Hey, Walter, you want to learn to do the twist?"

The only twist he wanted to learn was how to remove the child-proof cap on a bottle of tranquilizers. But before he could answer her, she grabbed him by the arm, dragged him off to his record collection, and started digging through the albums.

She flipped through them several times, unsuccessfully. "Well, so much for that idea. You don't have..." Then she noticed a small disk with a missing label. "Hey, I wonder what this is."

She put the record on the turntable and adjusted the playing speed. An exotic, Arabic-sounding

music blared from the speakers in a compelling, repetitive refrain. "It's not Chubby Checker," she noted, swaying to the music, "but if I'd known you had something like this, I'd have brought along my finger cymbals."

The green-skinned woman began a slow, sensuous dance around the writer, increasing her pace as the tempo of the music picked up. Walter saw the ripple of muscles in her arms and legs, the undulation of her hips, the exuberant look on her face as she wriggled about him. He could feel her hands brush across his face, his shoulders. Her warm body writhed close to him; his pulse raced, his heart pounded...

And every eye in the room was glued on him. He stood there, tense and frozen.

"Come on, Walter," Jennifer cooed, gently jabbing his shoulder. "Enjoy yourself! How many other men can say they had a green woman dance for them?"

"She's right," Al said. "Even I've never had that honour -- yet."

The writer suddenly heard a tentative knock on his front door, and rushed to open it, relieved to have some excuse to escape a tense moment. What greeted him this time was a black-haired, blue-eyed man dressed in black pants, black boots, and a yellow turtleneck shirt with an insignia Walter thought he'd seen somewhere before.

The man was obviously disoriented; he looked from the writer to the front of the house, plainly bewildered. "I was on shore leave in Mojave," he babbled, "when a strange silver vessel appeared out of nowhere. An old man and a teen-aged boy got out, herded me into their craft... Next thing I knew, I was here -- wherever here is..."

"Who are you?"

"Christopher Pike, captain of the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE," he replied.

Walter's mind reeled with a peculiar kind of déjà vu; he remembered the ENTERPRISE -- only too well. With a sigh of resignation, he took Pike by the elbow and led him inside. "I can't explain what happened to you, Captain Pike, but maybe one of my...friends can help you get back where you belong."

They went into the living room, where Jennifer was still dancing. "Oh, Walter, you're back," she said, smiling. "Who's your friend?"

Pike looked up at the She-Hulk. "Vina?"

"No, but I'll answer to it if you like." She grabbed the ENTERPRISE captain. "How about joining me for the next dance?"

"Th...this place..." Pike stammered. "I was about to go riding with Tango..."

"You want to do the tango?" Jennifer pressed him close to her, hoisted him off his feet, and glided across the floor as he squirmed in her arms.

"What I wouldn't give to be in his place right now," Al observed.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Walter replied. What he wouldn't give to be in Fred Saberhagen's

place right now.

Pike finally broke free of the green woman's grasp. "This place!" he repeated. "I'm back on Talos IV!"

"Talos IV?" Al asked.

"That's right, Talos IV, you illusion!"

"That's hologram to you, pal!" Al retorted, stepping away from the alpha-wave enhancer and becoming invisible.

"None of this is real!" Pike shouted. "None of it! Not the Orion female..." He pointed to the She-Hulk. "...not the Sk'orr..." He pointed to Birdman. "...not any of you! This is all just an illusion!"

Don't I wish, Walter thought.

The crazed captain suddenly grabbed the writer by his collar. "You thought you could fool me, didn't you, Keeper? Your little breeding project was ruined, so you decided to get your revenge by kidnapping me. Well, it won't work! I'm not about to mate with any female you supply, not them..." He gestured wildly toward Jennifer and Marella. "...or anyone you abduct from my ship!" He began throttling Walter, but was quickly restrained by the timely intervention of Birdman and Hymie, who dragged him away.

The writer rubbed his throat. He was upset by Pike's arrival; of all the peculiar guests he'd ever had, this was the first time he'd invited a raving lunatic into his home.

But what really bothered him was that the raving lunatic was someone other than himself.

Birdman joined him. "We've got him restrained for now," he said. "Avenger will watch to make sure he doesn't try anything." Pike was stretched out on the sofa, with the great eagle perched on the back of the couch; numerous rips in the fabric showed where the bird had dug in his talons. Hymie sat on the prisoner's legs. "I told Hymie to sit on him," the winged man explained.

"Good...thinking..."

Bill and Ted joined them. "Your friend is weird," Bill remarked.

"Totally," Ted agreed.

The writer stared at them. They should talk!

A loud crash! interrupted their conversation. "What was that?" Jennifer asked.

"It sounds like an old paint can fell over in the basement," Walter answered. "I'll go take a look."

"Why bother?" Al asked, reappearing. "I'll look for you."

The hologram got down on his hands and knees, then leaned forward so his head and upper body

passed through the floor. "Uh-oh. There's more than an old paint can down there. There's..."

Just then, Smart tripped over the alpha-wave enhancer, knocking the device over and making the hologram both invisible and inaudible. "Oops, sorry about that," the CONTROL agent apologized.

Walter started to leave the room. "Wait, I'll go with you," the She-Hulk called after him.

"Don't bother."

"Someone should go with you," Birdman told him. "Other than me, of course."

"I said, don't bother! You've done enough for me already!" And if they do any more, I'll be in a padded cell -- with Pike for a room-mate. He paused for a moment to watch Bill and Ted struggle with their alpha-wave enhancer, then went out. Now, he could be alone for a while.

A few minutes later, the writer returned, a pained expression on his face. "Well, Mr. Stock," Bill asked, "did you find out what the noise was?"

"Yes..."

Seven men burst into the room behind the writer. Five of them carried Uzis and wore dark pants, blue turtlenecks, black hoods with goggles, red sashes, and patches with the letters "F-E-A-R" running vertically down the left side of their chests. The other two wore black leather jackets; one -- with dark hair -- wore a black turtleneck, and the other -- with a grey-white moustache and a small scar on his left cheek -- wore red. Both sported shoulder patches with a red vulture and the word "KAOS." And both carried nine-millimetre Lugers, which were pointed directly at Walter's head.

The man with the moustache surveyed the room, then focused on one particular individual. "So, Maxwell Schmart, we meet again!"

"Siegfried! The old hide-out-in-the-basement trick!"

"Exactly," the KAOS man agreed.

"Who is Siegfried?" Marella demanded.

"Allow me to introduce Konrad Siegfried," Smart said, pointing to his arch-enemy. "The most cunning and ruthless KAOS agent of them all."

"At your service," Siegfried replied, rising on the balls of his feet and clicking his heels together. "And, of course, you remember my associate, Schtarker." Starker, the other KAOS agent, nodded and smiled.

"So," Smart went on, "all the time we were upstairs trying to figure out where the stolen manuscript was, you were in the basement."

"That is right," Siegfried answered. He turned to Walter. "I will bet you never expected to have KAOS in your house."

Never expected it? By now, he was used to it!

"That is a good one, Siegfried," his fellow agent chortled. He pinched the writer's cheek. "We have plans for you! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The man with the moustache angrily turned to him. "Schtarker, this is KAOS! We do not ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha here!"

"What about a little heh-heh-heh?"

"That is okay."

"Now that you have us all at gunpoint, will you kindly tell us what was on those computer disks?" Archangel asked.

"The plans for the ultimate weapon for the collapse of world governments," Siegfried gloated. "The anti-Stealth lidar!"

"Lidar?" Smart queried.

"It works like radar, only it uses infra-red instead of radio waves," Goldsmith-Briggs explained. "It senses the heat given off by aircraft engines and the friction of the air surrounding them. Our Stealth technology would be ineffective against it."

"Think of it!" The moustached KAOS operative exulted. "Your most advanced technology rendered useless at the hands of KAOS and FEAR, and anyone else we choose to sell it to!"

"Hold it, Siegfried!" Smart countered. "Any technology you possess, we can counter!"

"But only after years of research and billions of tax dollars. Or do I need to remind you about the cost over-runs on the Stealth bomber? Have you ever wondered who was responsible for the Pentagon having to pay six hundred dollars for a hammer?"

"That was you?" the CONTROL agent asked incredulously. Siegfried nodded.

"And I," the other KAOS agent added, "was responsible for the three hundred dollar toilet seats." He snickered for almost a minute, until a glare from his superior silenced him.

The men from FEAR gestured with their Uzis, indicating that their captives should move into the corner. Walter watched them comply, Smart bumping into the alpha-wave enhancer again, Archangel taking Marella by the arm. Birdman glared defiantly; Bill and Ted muttered, "Bogus!" And Jennifer...

Where was Jennifer? A six and a half foot tall green woman was hard to ignore, even amongst the odd assortment of people he had here.

One FEAR agent pointed his Uzi at Hymie and commanded, "Move!" The robot got up from the sofa -- and Pike leapt up, knocked the FEAR man over, and threw himself on top of Starker. "I've had enough of these illusions of yours, Talosian! Enough, I tell you!"

In the confusion, Walter went for Siegfried's gun, but his clumsy effort earned him only the butt of it. The KAOS master spy then pistol-whipped Pike before pulling him off the choking Starker. "Your efforts at resistance are futile!" He trained his gun on them.

"My amaz-ta-flash will make you see things differently!" Birdman exclaimed, pointing a finger at the KAOS agents. A reddish beam of light leapt from his finger -- only to fizzle just short of its target. "My solar powers are too weak! I've been out of the sun too long!"

Walter thought Birdman had been in the sun too long.

"Now, then," Siegfried said, pointing his weapon directly at the writer's head. "If you people are through playing games, we will take the disks we came for and be on our way."

"Wait a minute! Are you saying you don't have the disks?" Marella asked.

"Ah, someone with brains," the man from KAOS replied. "No, we do not have the disks. If we did, would we have spent the last two hours in a damp basement listening to that terrible noise?" He glanced coldly at Bill and Ted. "Someone beat us to them. That someone will come forward with the disks now, or you will all die, starting with you." He brought his gun barrel to Walter's temple.

"You won't get away with this!" Archangel exclaimed.

"He's right, Siegfried," Smart said. "At this very moment, the entire Los Angeles police force is ready to storm this house and arrest every one of you. Would you believe it? The entire Los Angeles police force!"

"I find that hard to believe," Siegfried replied.

"Oh? Would you believe two SWAT teams with high-powered carbines?"

"I also find that hard to believe."

"Would you believe a ten-car division with sawed-off shotguns?"

"I do not think so."

"How about an angry Cub Scout with a pea-shooter?"

The two KAOS agents dragged Walter toward the front door; their FEAR allies held the others in check. "This is a most egregious situation, dude," Bill said to Ted.

"Definitely most untriumphant," the other boy agreed. "It's too bad we don't have the time machine. Remember when I dumped the garbage can on my dad's head?"

"Yeah, that was bodacious," Bill replied. "But who's to say we won't have access to the time machine in the future? Then we could come back to this moment, and..."

A shower of garbage suddenly poured over three of the FEAR agents; then a green plastic garbage can bearing the words "Wyld Stallyns Rules!" dropped over each man. "Excellent move, Ted!" The two teenagers exchanged high-fives and air guitar riffs. "But you should have remembered to empty the garbage cans first."

"Sorry, dude," Ted responded.

Birdman's eagle flew into the face of one of the remaining FEAR men, causing him to drop his gun.

"Good work, Avenger!" the winged man exclaimed, as he decked the disarmed enemy agent with a well-placed punch. The fifth agent started for the avian hero, who called out to Hymie, "Tackle him!" The robot lowered his head, locked his arms, and plowed into the FEAR agent, knocking him backwards; the man fell unconscious against the far wall.

As the erstwhile prisoners advanced on Siegfried and Starker, the two KAOS agents brandished their Lugers and pointed them at Walter. "One more step by any of you," Siegfried threatened, "and he dies."

"Does that include me?" a gravelly disembodied voice asked.

The KAOS agents looked around the room. "Who said that?"

"I did." AI suddenly appeared alongside the alpha-wave enhancer.

"Who are you?"

"Would you believe I'm a holographic observer from the future?" His answer was wide-eyed silence. "And would you believe there's a large green woman standing right behind you."

Siegfried recovered his composure. "Very clever, Schmart," he said to the CONTROL agent. "But if you think I am going to fall for your tricks..."

He was cut off by a constricting band of pressure around his chest. He looked down -- and saw a powerful green arm wrapped around him. Starker was similarly trapped. Both KAOS agents looked up in surprise, into the angry green face of the She-Hulk.

"Sometimes," she said, "you really ought to believe what someone tells you." She tightened her grip. "Now then, how many bones do you want me to break before you drop those guns?" When they didn't answer, she tightened her grip still more. "Nobody screws up my date!"

Numbly, the spies complied with her demand. Both guns hit the floor; Siegfried's, however, landed butt first and discharged. The bullet hit Walter in the shoulder, and knocked him off his feet.

"Walter!" Jennifer exclaimed, releasing her prisoners and rushing to his side.

Siegfried and Starker inhaled raggedly, then ran out the front door. "After them!" Smart cried. "They're getting away!"

Coldsmith-Briggs stood erect. "They won't get far." He took a small radio from the inside pocket of his jacket. "AIRWOLF, this is Archangel. Move in!"

A loud mechanical scream nearly drowned out the unmistakable clatter of helicopter blades. Everyone looked outside, where they saw a sleekly menacing black-and-white helicopter swoop down toward the fleeing KAOS agents. "It's not the entire Los Angeles police force," the man in white commented smugly, "but it suits our purposes."

Outside, Starker tapped Siegfried on the shoulder. "It's after us! We've had it!"

"Scharker, we are KAOS!" the other man snapped. "You will not panic until I give you the order to panic!" Machine gun barrels popped out of either side of the black helicopter, and a three-

tubed missile launcher dropped out of its white underbelly. "Prepare to panic!"

The chopper spat a twin stream of tracer bullets, plowing two neat furrows diagonally across Walter's lawn. The fleeing KAOS agents ran straight for Archangel's white helicopter. A missile from AIRWOLF cut them off, blowing up the white chopper and hurling the two men to the ground.

"Bogus, dude," Starker said.

"Most untriumphant," Siegfried concurred.

Inside, Archangel winced. "I guess Hawke never did forgive me for down-drafting that eagle."

Birdman seized him, and Avenger squawked in fury. "You down-drafted an eagle?"

The others were all congregated around Walter's prone body. "Is he going to be all right?" the She-Hulk asked nervously. "Did the bullet hit any vital organs?"

Smart looked him over. "Missed him by that much," he said, holding up one hand with thumb and forefinger held close; he quickly moved them apart. "It just grazed him."

The writer stirred, and mumbled something unintelligible. "What's he saying?" the green woman asked.

Smart knelt over him and cupped his ear against the writer's mouth. Then he got up, a sheepish grin on his face. "He said to get my knee off his chest."

Jennifer scooped Walter up in her arms. "Oh, Walter, you're going to be all right!" She gave him a long, deep kiss.

Walter Stock promptly lost consciousness.

* * * * *

When he came to, Walter found himself sitting on the sofa alongside Jennifer, who had one arm draped protectively around him. Siegfried, Starker, and the five FEAR agents were tied up in the centre of the room; Birdman, Avenger, and Hymie watched over them. Pike stood by the alpha-wave enhancer with AI, insisting that the hologram was a large-brained grey-skinned creature trying to breed him with Earth females; AI continually protested that the only male he wanted to breed was himself. Marella was with Bill and Ted, discussing the latest rock groups, while Coldsmit-Briggs discussed the particulars of their current case with Maxwell Smart. From the look on Archangel's face, Smart was the last person he wanted to be near just then.

"Well, I guess our date is off," Jennifer said with a sigh. "But, you know, I've had a lot more fun with you than I've had on most of my other dates." She bent down and kissed Walter's forehead. "I wish we could have gotten your book back, though. I know how much it means to you."

"Yeah." He sighed heavily. "I wish I knew who took it."

At that moment, a faint ozone smell permeated the room, and a crackling sound filled the air. A square patch of ceiling suddenly glowed bright white, and a large object fell through it, landing on the floor. It looked like a telephone booth.

"Oh, no!" the writer moaned to himself. "Not him again!"

The object looked almost exactly like a telephone booth; its door folded out when its occupant emerged. The man wore a dark grey overcoat over grey shirt and trousers; he had close-clipped hair, a moustache, an earring in his left ear, and a strange pair of dark sunglasses. He removed the glasses, did a slow-motion version of an air guitar strum, and said, "Party on, dudes!"

"Rufus!" the teenagers exclaimed, answering his strum with their own. "What are you doing here, dude?"

"Just paying a visit to the three most influential forces in our twenty-seventh century civilisation," the time traveller answered.

"Three most influential forces?" Bill asked, confused. "If Ted and I are two of them, like, who's the third?"

Rufus pointed to Walter. "He is."

"Mr. Stock?" Ted asked, startled.

"Me?" Walter asked, stunned.

"That's right, dudes. Once you two guys got your playing down to the truly excellent style you became noted for, you needed inspiration for the triumphant songs you wrote. The Great Scribe over there..." He pointed to Walter again. "...provided it. Every one of your hit albums was based on one of his books."

"Wow, Mr. Stock," Ted said. "You're responsible for making us into a most bodacious act."

The writer cringed. He'd rather be responsible for cleaning out the stables at Anne McCaffrey's ranch.

"But the biggest-selling album you have," the time traveller continued, "is the one based on his greatest novel, Alchemist's World."

"My manuscript! But it was stolen!"

"I know," Rufus answered. "I took it."

"You what?"

"Right. So they wouldn't." He pointed to the scowling enemy agents. Then he removed a thick sheaf of papers from his overcoat. "And here it is." He handed the manuscript to Archangel, along with six floppy disks. "You'll find the codes for the anti-Stealth lidar scattered all through the manuscript."

"Thank you," Goldsmith-Briggs said, pocketing the manuscript and disks.

"Hey! What about me?" Walter protested.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stock," Archangel replied. "But we need these as evidence."

"Of course they do, Walter," Rufus said. "So I stopped at a computer store five days from now and bought you some floppy disks without any secret codes on them. A week later, when you were out, I snuck in here and made you a copy." He reached into his overcoat again and removed another manuscript, along with a box of disks. "And here are two disk copies of the manuscript, just like you had before."

"Gee, thanks. I don't know what to say." The writer blushed in embarrassment. "Now, I just have to get this to my editor by tomorrow morning."

"That's already been taken care of," the time traveller advised. "I made an extra copy, and delivered it to your editor tomorrow morning."

"Great! All my worries are over!"

Well, not quite all of them. He still had to get rid of...

"Terrific!" Rufus said. "Listen, I've got to run, but before I go, would you mind autographing this for me?" He took a thick paperback from his pocket and handed it to Walter, along with a pen. The writer examined the book, and a shock went through him when he saw the title. It was Alchemist's World.

He opened the book to the title page, autographed it, and handed it back to the time traveller, trying not to think about the paradoxes involved. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He pocketed the book again, then took Pike by the arm. "Come on, I'll give you a lift back to your own time." He led the captain to his time machine, deposited him inside, then went back to speak to Bill and Ted. "Listen, guys, I'll stop by tomorrow afternoon and drop off the time machine so you can, uh, take out the garbage." Then he returned to his machine, did an air guitar strum, and saluted everyone with, "Be excellent to each other!"

"Party on, dude!" the two teenagers replied, doing their own air guitar riffs again.

Rufus stepped into the time machine and punched out a code on the push-button phone. The pseudo phone booth crackled with energy, then fell through the floor, leaving a glowing white square as the only sign it had ever existed.

"Now, that's what I call an exit," Al declared. "And, speaking of which, it's time I made mine. Ziggy just located Sam; he leaped into the body of a contestant on 'The Price Is Right.' At last, a chance to meet Barker's Beauties up close and personal!" A lecherous smile crossed the hologram's face. "Sam's not going to believe the story I have to tell him."

Sam's not the only one who isn't going to believe it, Walter thought as Al disappeared.

"And it's about time we were going, too," Archangel announced, using his radio to signal the black helicopter to return and land. "We've got a bunch of prisoners to deliver to a federal penitentiary." He motioned the KAOS and FEAR agents to their feet, and he and Marella ushered them out the door. "I'll look forward to seeing your book when it comes out."

"And I'll make sure he reads it," Marella added.

Suddenly, Goldsmith-Briggs paused, and turned to the She-Hulk. "I was most impressed by the, uh, display of your talents, Miss Walters. I'd like you to consider joining the Firm. Do you have

any outfits in white?"

"A few," she replied. "But I look much better in purple."

"Well, you can't blame a man for trying." He turned back to his prisoners, and was met by a saucy look from Marella. "Don't you say anything," he warned her. She smiled slyly in reply.

They were almost out the door when Birdman spoke. "Excuse me, Archangel," he said humbly, "but could I possibly ride back with you? The sun's just set, and..."

"Say no more. You and my pilot ought to get along quite well."

"Oh? What's his name?"

"Stringfellow Hawke."

They all left together, and soon the sound of helicopter blades merged into a shrill mechanical whine as they departed.

Smart turned to his robot partner. "Hymie, I think we should be leaving ourselves." He shook Walter's hand. "It's been nice meeting you, and I'm glad you got your manuscript back." He turned to the robot again. "Come on, Hymie, let's hit the trail."

The CONTROL agent headed for the front door. Hymie followed, pausing every third step to bend over and pound his fist against the floor.

"Well, I guess that leaves just us, Mr. Stock," Ted said. "What would you like us to play for you?"

The writer fixed him with a hard, burning stare, and Bill took his friend by the arm. "I think he wants to be alone with Shulkie, Ted."

"Oh, yeah, right... Well, have an excellent time, dude."

"Right on, man!" Walter replied. The teenagers looked at each other in confusion.

"Unfortunately, our big date is going to be a trip to the hospital so Walter can have his wound treated," Jennifer said, running her fingers through the writer's hair. "Tell you what, guys. You get your equipment together and put it outside, and I'll haul it back for you. How's that?"

"You got it, She-Hulk," Bill replied. Within minutes, the living room was cleared of cables, amplifiers, and all the other equipment, musical and otherwise.

The green woman leaned over Walter. "I guess you got everything you wanted," she said, smiling. "Everything, that is, except a fascinating evening with me. But I'm going to be in town for a few more days. We could go out tomorrow night, and the night after that, if you like. And if you're ever in New York on business, look me up. I can't promise I won't be involved by then, but even if I am, we can still have lunch."

The only business Walter ever had in New York was an annual writers' banquet. He imagined having Jennifer as his date for the banquet. She'd certainly turn a lot of heads. And Asimov would probably flirt with her -- but then, he'd flirt with anything that had two "X" chromosomes.

He looked up into her green face. "I'd like that."

She reached down to him; he reached up to her. Their lips almost touched...

Then Ted came back. "We're ready, She-Hulk," he said.

"I'll be right there," she answered, then turned back to Walter. She gave him a quick kiss, instead of the passionate one she wanted to give him. Then she went to the door, turned, and blew him another kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I get their stuff moved. See you."

"See you," he replied.

Then Walter Stock leaned back on the sofa and surveyed his living room. The sofa had two broken legs; the carpet had scorch marks; there were cracks in one wall. Through the nearest window, he could see two neat rows of torn-up earth, and the smouldering debris of an exploded helicopter.

But he didn't care. He had Alchemist's World back, and his \$40,000 advance was saved. It would probably be eaten up by the next increase in his homeowner's insurance -- if he still had any homeowner's insurance after this -- but just at that moment, he didn't care. He was happy.

Just one thing troubled him. He was going out with Jennifer tomorrow night...



"Stars and Sand"

(By Mary Robertson)

A sea of stars, a sea of desert sands --
There's little difference in these lives I've known.
I'm weapon wielded always by the hands
Of those who would not let me loose my own.

As youth, my sweat supplied a people's need
For moisture wrested from unwilling ground;
As man, my labours sow another seed --
The last remaining Jedi, rebel-bound.

I am their symbol of an age gone by,
And more than once, my presence has suffused
Recruits with hope no other could supply --
A covenant of user and of used.

No matter what the propagandists claim,
The Empire and Alliance are the same.



From Deep Space...

The time has come to bid you all farewell for another year. But before we do, a final word or two, and our usual observations on the many people who helped to make this fanzine possible.

You may remember that a year ago we issued a challenge to our readers and to all would-be writers — to write a short story (not just a scene or vignette), complete in no more than twelve pages. By now, we suspect you may have noticed the results. Oh, well, maybe next year...

But although they didn't exactly keep their efforts short, we must congratulate our writers. One and all, their stories were so good that we, as editor, had precious little work to do. It's enough to make us feel just a bit guilty...

You can practically see Joyce Ashcroft's A-TEAM story, "The Big Bad Wolfe," on a television screen in your mind. No professional writer could do better, with either characters or plot. Fast-paced, full of the action the series was famous for, the story belongs where all A-TEAM fans can see it.

Linda Ruth Pfonner's "Ransom Demand" is so compelling a tale that one of our proofreaders stopped working on it, just to see what happened next! (Then, being a conscientious sort, she went back and read it again...) But then, we've come to expect that kind of brilliant writing from Linda, who is able to handle so many different universes with great ease and expertise.

Mary Robertson's vignettes and poetry prove once again that she is indeed a master story-teller. From Jean-Luc Picard of STAR TREK, THE NEXT GENERATION to Captain Apollo of BATTLESTAR GALACTICA, she brings her characters to life with only a few verbal brush strokes. And her poetry evokes such memories -- the romanticism of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, the magic of STAR WARS, the old, familiar delights of STAR TREK...

Rodney Ruff's fantastically mixed world of "Writer's Workshop" is as hilarious as its two predecessors. He tells us we have now seen the last of Walter Stock -- but we doubt we have seen the last of Rodney Ruff!

The new year brought a new name to a familiar talent. joan hanke-woods is now delphyne -- but the artistic skill is the same. No capital letters -- but definitely a capital talent. She deserves her Hugo -- and perhaps a dozen more!

We put the Panasonic Screwdriver to work with a vengeance for THE OSIRIS FILES #4, and even made it proofread for us. It still thinks "inthe" is a word, has added "Inhis" to its list of spelling quirks, and can't tell "of" from "or." But our human proofreaders can, and they had quite a work-out. We apologize to Mary Greeley, Lisa Mudano, David Morgan, and Wayne Stipla for all the mistakes -- and we promise to do better next time!

A heart-felt "Well done!" -- and many thanks to all. We'll be back next year, with new stories, poetry, and art from the many realms of television, theatre, and films. Until then...

May your days be filled with the wonder, the beauty, and the magic of life.

Blessed be!

OFFICIAL GUIDE-LINES FOR OSIRIS PUBLICATIONS

OSIRIS Publications has a professionally trained editorial staff. All our publications, although written by non-professionals, are and will continue to be handled in as professional a manner possible. The following guidelines should be observed by anyone submitting material to OSIRIS Publications for any purpose.

1. All written material will be edited, and decisions of the editor will be final. If any rewriting is required, the editor will return the submission to the writer, with appropriate comments. Otherwise, any alterations in spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, etc. will be made by the editor. Under normal circumstances, no writer will be accorded the so-called right of editorial review. Any decisions on the merits or acceptability of a submission will be made by the editorial staff; such a decision will be final.
2. Written material should be neatly typed on $8\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 white paper, double-spaced. Only one side of the page should be used, and all pages should be numbered. Hand-written or hand-printed manuscripts will be accepted only at the discretion of the editor; these should be double-spaced on $8\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 lined white paper. The editorial staff reserves the right to reject any manuscript not deemed to be sufficiently legible.
3. Art submissions should be in black and white ink only, with no large, dense black areas, and should be no larger than $8\frac{1}{2}$ x 11, including a 1-inch margin on all sides. Due to the high cost of screening, pencilled or coloured art will be accepted only if deemed truly exceptional. All art must be completely camera-ready. Artists should send either originals or good-quality photocopies that require no touch-ups; original art is sent at the artist's own risk. For art that is to be reproduced in full colour, contact the editorial staff for instructions.
4. Written material or art containing or depicting gratuitous excessive violence or explicit sex will be rejected. In such matters, the decision of the editorial staff will be final.
5. No written material or art currently under consideration by OSIRIS Publications should be submitted to any other publication until a decision on that material's acceptability has been made. Similarly, no written material or art currently under consideration elsewhere should be submitted to OSIRIS Publications.
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7. No material derived in any way from any media source will be considered for inclusion in the fanzine entitled IMAGINATION. Only original, nonderivative material should be submitted for consideration in that zine. Media-derived material submitted to IMAGINATION will not automatically be considered for any other OSIRIS Publications fanzine.
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9. No one will be notified of receipt of any submission unless that submission is accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope or postcard. No submissions will be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope bearing adequate return postage, and no returned submissions will be insured unless payment for that insurance is included with the submission. Once a submission has been accepted and scheduled for publication, the contributor will be so advised.
10. While decisions of the editorial staff are generally to be considered final, any contributor wishing to discuss an editorial decision is free to do so, and a decision may be reversed if the contributor can provide adequate support for such a change.

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Special thanks, once again, to Doris Harrison,
And a very special nod to the wolf pack

In loving memory of Bridget Britanny Flake,
Who, like Flicka before her,
Is --and will always be -- much missed



THE OSIRIS FILES
c/o OSIRIS Publications
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T.W.P.S.



The timber wolf, or grey wolf, is one of the most misunderstood, most unjustly maligned, most feared, and most romanticized of all endangered predators. Large, powerful, and elusive, the "big bad wolf" has for untold centuries haunted the dreams, nightmares, legends, and folk tales of human society. Western cultures in particular have tended to depict the wolf as crafty, blood-thirsty, and even supernaturally evil, although Native Americans admired him; indeed, many tribes held him in great reverence.

In the United States during the nineteenth century, ranchers and farmers joined with the federal government in an unprecedented attempt to wipe out the wolf. A bounty was offered, and as many as two million animals were ultimately destroyed -- brutally trapped, shot, and poisoned. Once, literally hundreds of thousands of wolves roamed the contiguous United States at any given time. Now, only about 1,500 remain in Minnesota's Superior National Forest; scattered small packs live in northern Wisconsin, Wyoming, Colorado, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The famous Isle Royal wolf pack, studied for years by biologists and researchers investigating predator/prey relationships, has virtually died out. Today, Alaska is the only state with a sizable wolf population.

Gradually, we have learned how wrong we were about the wolf. As prey species multiplied unchecked, as moose and deer began to wander into more heavily populated areas in search of a dwindling food supply, we realized at least a few of our mistakes about the role of predators in general -- and about the wolf in particular.

This "monster" of our childhood is a predator, a hunter, a killer -- but he never kills indiscriminately. In fact, the wolf possesses many social characteristics that resemble those of humans. As a rule, wolves mate for life, and a wolf pack is no more than an extended family, with all members working together and cooperating with one another. The wolf is recognized as perhaps the best parent in the animal world, and all pack members care for the pups.

In reality, wolves have a hard time living up to their reputation as deadly predators. Only approximately one in twelve hunts results in a kill, and often the quarry -- especially if a large moose or bison -- injures or kills one or more of its attackers. And there has never been a single documented case in the United States of a healthy wild wolf attacking a human being.

For nearly twenty-five years, the Timber Wolf Preservation Society in the Milwaukee suburb of Greendale, Wisconsin, has dedicated itself to the preservation and study of the wolf, and to the task of educating the public about the true nature of this intriguing animal.

Today, the Society faces extinction, and its twenty-five resident wolves face the possibility of undeserved death. Last summer, the owner of the property on which our "wolf farm" is located granted us a one-year extension on our lease; now, we must raise \$100,000 in order to retain our present location. Because wolves are highly territorial, they cannot easily be moved to another site; the stress would prove fatal to many, if not to all of them.

You can help! Become a member of the Society. Adopt one of our magnificent wolves. Buy a pin or a book, a t-shirt, a button, or a cap. Every dollar you give brings us that much closer to our goal. Fandom alone cannot raise all the money we need -- but fandom can help.

Our wolves -- gentle and affectionate, fierce and independent, stubborn and proud -- need all the help they can get. Learn about the wolf; see how you can make a difference. Write today to the Timber Wolf Preservation Society at 6669 South 76th Street, Greendale, WI 53129.





The OSIRIS Files



THE OSIRIS FILES is a general-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications, covering all the many and diverse universes of cinema and television.

In our premiere issue, you will find an all-new AIRWOLF story, in which Stringfellow Hawke finds himself accused of a series of vicious political assassinations. He can't see a way out of the trap...

It's Christmas-time, and a little girl sees an "angel," when Ralph Hinckley flies again as THE GREATEST AMERICAN HERO.

The scene shifts to the planet Sagittara, and the time to the night of the ill-fated Armistice with the Cylons. Workers hurry to put final touches on a new shuttle for the commander of the battlestar GALACTICA, only to find themselves in the middle of an Invasion...

Last of the fiction offerings for this issue is "Survive the Alliance," our ultimate tribute to the multi-media story. The Visitors have invaded Earth, the Resistance has called for help -- and the Colonials and Cylons have both answered. While on reconnaissance, Apollo is shot down by a menacing something that resembles a marine mammal with a propeller beanie, and Starbuck is kidnapped by...a talking automobile? The Firm is called in to help investigate the wreckage of an alien spacecraft, and the A-Team joins the battle...

Also included in THE OSIRIS FILES #1 are eleven beautiful STAR TREK and STAR WARS portraits by Hugo-winner Joan Hanke-Woods. First done ten years ago, these portraits have never before been published. They are printed on fine linen stock, in a format suitable for framing, and can easily be removed from the zine.

So, welcome to THE OSIRIS FILES! To order this new zine, with more than 120 pages to delight you, send a check or money order for \$15.00, payable to Joy Harrison in U.S. dollars only, to:


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THE **OSIRIS FILES**

No. 2

Indiana Jones returns to Cairo for the first time since his university days, seeking a powerful long-lost amulet he doesn't really believe exists. There's no danger -- until he and Short Round stumble upon an ancient cult, and a particularly gruesome trap.

Thomas Magnum has been shot, and lies near death. In fact, he's already decided he's going to die, and has said farewell -- at least in his mind -- to all those he loves. Then he meets Judi, and nothing can ever be the same again.

Long before his fateful meeting with Leia of Alderaan, Han Solo is asked to rescue another princess. But, as he discovers, not all princesses are susceptible to his irresistible charms.

Walter Stock is a science fiction writer, and Walter Stock has a bad -- possibly fatal -- case of "writer's block." Varied and unrelated universes come together as he seeks a cure, and an idea for a new story.

What happened to his kitchen? A.J. Simon is pretty sure he knows, but he can't quite pin down the evidence in "The Great Chocolate Chip Cookie Caper."

Vincent and his beloved Catherine are torn apart when a conscientious police officer decides Vincent is a loose end in an unsolved homicide case. Can either of them survive, with the police investigating them, and a continent between them?

The Cylons are poised to attack Earth, and the Colonials of the battlestar GALACTICA must join with the reptilian Visitors and the Earth-based human Resistance if they are to have any chance of defeating their ancient foes. Meanwhile, Stringfellow Hawke, MacGyver, and Remington Steele join Michael Knight and the A-Team in an effort to stop the rebel Diana and her fellow renegades. But after the long mutual distrust, can they all possibly work together -- even if the prize is the survival of the planet they cherish? The conclusion of "Survive the Alliance" brings even more of the excitement, drama, and humour followers of this story have come to expect.

Also included in THE OSIRIS FILES #2 is poetry by L.A. Carr, and magnificent art by Karen River, Gennie Summers, Toni Hardeman, Kate Soehnlen, Joan Hanker-Woods/Mori, and others. All this -- 170 skillfully written and beautifully illustrated pages -- can be ordered by sending a check or money order for \$18.00, payable to Joy Harrison in U.S. dollars only, to:

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THE **OSIRIS FILES**

No. 3

Robert McCall receives a menacing telephone call, and recognizes a hated voice out of his past, a voice that threatens what he holds most dear, while Vincent intervenes in an apparent mugging in Central Park, only to ultimately endanger the entire world below, as THE EQUALIZER joins BEAUTY AND THE BEAST in L.A. Carr's unforgettable story, "Saved by a Pawn."

Old nemesis Colonel Roderick Decker resorts to truth drugs, H.M. Murdock "forgets" how to fly, the usually impeccable Faceman becomes dishevelled, the Aquamaniac is back on the jazz, B.A. Baracus is his customary charming self -- and someone else is out to trap the A-TEAM in screenwriter Joyce Ashcroft's fast-paced adventure for television, "Forget Me Not, Sucker."

Stringfellow Hawke is badly wounded, and the KGB is hunting him as he flees with a Russian scientist who possesses the antidote to a new and lethal plague. AIRWOLF flies to the rescue -- but the disease is loose, MIGs are on the way, and Hawke is dying, in master story-teller Linda Ruth Pfonner's tense and gripping "Plague Bullet."

Science fiction writer Walter Stock is back, this time with enough ideas to keep any author busy for a lifetime. But his computer is quite literally possessed, and his latest unwelcome visitors -- including a demon assassin, a hologram, a paranoid mutant, time travellers, and the police -- are a peculiar lot indeed, in Rodney Ruff's delightful multi-media romp, "Writer's Cramp."

And still more, drawn from the universes of STAR TREK, INDIANA JONES, SIMON AND SIMON, BLADE RUNNER... Stories and poetry by Jeannie Webster, Beth Bowles, Mary Robertson... Art by Toni Hardeman, Dorinda Frances, Pat Posadas... A magnificent cover and interior illustrations by professional artist Sandra Santara... Breath-taking portraits (suitable for framing!) by award-winner Joan Hanke-Woods...

THE OSIRIS FILES #3 is the 1989 multi-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications, featuring stories, poetry, and art drawn from the many universes of U.S. and International television and motion pictures. Its more than 170 skillfully written and beautifully illustrated pages can be ordered by sending a check or money order for \$18.00, payable to Joy Harrison in U.S. dollars only, to:

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BROTHER OF SHADOWS... AND SON OF THE LIGHT

This is the way of it, how it happened. I am wisdom and foresight, and I sit upon his shoulder, and I know...

He saw the subtle flicker that marked the power surge, initiating the lighting sequence.

Suddenly, his mind screamed warning at him, but it was already too late. The room was full of light, flooded with light -- bright, white, agonizing illumination that seemed to burn through his eye into his brain and down through his spinal column into every fibre of his being. Light, light that was no longer instrumental to see by, no longer an environmental factor, to be adjusted or taken into account -- but a fiery source of agony so profound he could not grasp the depths of that huge torment...

He was trapped, and he was helpless, and he suffered pain he would not even comprehend. And then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone again.

She had turned off the lights.

OSIRIS Publications takes great pride in presenting the latest -- and last -- BLAKE'S 7 novel by talented multiple award winner Susan Matthews, acclaimed by many as the fandom's finest writer. Set in the days immediately following the debacle on Gauda Prime, it begins with a premise long popular among BLAKE'S 7 fans -- that there were survivors of that disastrous encounter. But Susan Matthews never does quite what others do; she tells her own story.

For one survivor, at least, death would be far preferable to what Servalan has planned. But, even knowing the codes for her private yacht, how can he escape, when the very corridors of the Federation complex that is her base -- and his eternal, luxurious prison -- are lethal to him? He knows the codes, knows the way out, and the doors are unlocked -- but he knows, too, that he cannot leave, cannot venture beyond that first door...

There is one way to be free, and only one -- but is he strong enough to take it?

An incredible story of courage and determination -- and, yes, of loyalty, too -- BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT is disturbing, frightening, and highly provocative. This is not a story for the weak; it contains scenes of such graphic violence that even the strongest may flinch. But, although shockingly violent at times, it is never needlessly so; it unhesitatingly explores a man's deepest fears, and becomes a triumph of his will, although at terrible cost.

BROTHER OF SHADOWS...AND SON OF THE LIGHT is beautifully illustrated by the superbly talented multiple Zen Award winner Suzan Lovett, and features a magnificently detailed colour cover.

To order this novel, a must for any BLAKE'S 7 fan -- or for anyone else who appreciates truly fine writing -- send a check or money order in the amount of \$2~~X~~00 U.S. (first class postage included), payable to JOY HARRISON, to:

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THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER

THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER is a British-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications.

In our premiere issue, meet two charming drones and their human master amidst the trees of the Last Forest of Earth, and travel with the Doctor and Jamie to a planet where an agricultural colony is dying, its settlers unable to pay for the basic needs of survival -- while surrounded by incredible mineral wealth. Join the Time Lord and his companion Tegan as they visit Nafnelor for a holiday -- only to find themselves once again involved in a struggle to save a world from alien invasion. Explore some of the many intricacies of the DOCTOR WHO universe, in an attempt to unravel such mysteries as the Doctor's age, his relationship with the Master and Romana, his true name... **\$14.10**

In our second issue, the Doctor and his companions travel to Central America, where they discover the purpose of the mysterious drawings of Nazca. Then the Time Lord, this time with companions Ben and Polly, inadvertently journey to Nazi Germany, where they meet that nation's malevolent Master. Next, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT experiences a most peculiar Christmas Eve, as strange events unfold before his disbelieving eyes. And finally, the crew of the Scorpio (BLAKE'S 7) have landed on Gauda Prime, where they met with disaster. But who really died there? And who survived? **\$16.80**

All this, and more, await you on the pages of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER. To order either of these first two issues, send a check or money order for **\$xx**, payable to JOY HARRISON in U.S. dollars only, to:

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THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER

THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER is a British-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications. Our third issue features stories by Marcia Brin (UFO), Kathie Hughes (DOCTOR WHO), Barbara Mater (DOCTOR WHO), Linda Pfonner (ROBIN HOOD), and Mary Robertson (BLAKE'S 7); art is by Toni Hardeman, Karen River, and Hugo-winner joan hanke-woods.

Did you ever wonder what made brilliant, likeable Ed Straker the cold, embittered head of S.H.A.D.O., and leader of the fight against alien invasion? And everyone knows heroes like Roj Blake do all sorts of heroic things -- but while they're at it, who does the laundry? Join Vila Restal aboard the Liberator, and find out what happens when he makes his first attempt at household chores.

A simple (!) explanation of the game of cricket leads the Doctor to underwater adventure with Jacques-Yves Cousteau and the crew of Calypso. And the Hooded Man is a target once again, but this time, Gisburne actually has him helpless -- and Herne himself may not be able to save Robin from certain death!

Finally, THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER #3 presents a very special feature. "ROBIN HOOD: An Artist's View" is a set of five portraits by Karen River, easily removed from the zine and presented in a format suitable for framing.

All this, and much more, await you on the pages of THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER #3. To order, send a check or money order for \$15.00, payable to JOY HARRISON in U.S. dollars only, to:

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THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER

THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER is a British-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications. Our fourth issue features stories, poetry, and art drawn from the universes of BLAKE'S 7, DOCTOR WHO, and ROBIN OF SHERWOOD.

Representing BLAKE'S 7 are "The Dark Prince" and "Understanding Avon," both written by Mary Robertson, in which we see new and interesting views of fandom's favourite computer technician. Also from this universe are "The Politics of Embezzlement" by Jeannie Webster, which takes us back to the beginning, and "Until It's Time to Go..." -- also from Mary Robertson -- which takes us long years into the future.

For the fans of DOCTOR WHO, we offer "The Ring of Ruuan!" by Vicci Cook, which takes Doctor #3 and his companion Jo Grant to a strangely euphoric world where no one -- and no thing -- is quite what he seems. In "Doctor Who and the Lacertan Raiders" by Barbara Mater, Doctor #4 and K-9 go to the rescue of a band of human slaves, aided by some unlikely friends from a hitch-hiker's universe...

"The Children of Herne," written by Kathie Hughes, combines the world of ROBIN OF SHERWOOD with that of DOCTOR WHO, as the Time Lord and Leela meet Robin's outlaw band and join forces with them to outwit the Sheriff of Nottingham. "Ordinary Vilain" by Jeanine Hennig gives us new insight into Robin's mind as he agonises over a harsh accusation. And Linda Ruth Pfonner's "Tangled in Holly" comes to its dramatic conclusion in two forms, as we also present "Double Helix," an alternate ending by our story-contest winner L.A. Carr. Rounding out our ROBIN OF SHERWOOD offerings are five poems, ending with a powerful "Eulogy for an Enemy."

Art for THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER's 1988 issue is by Toni Hardeman, Kate Soehnlen, Pat Posadas, Jeanine Hennig, Gennie Summers, and Hugo-winner Joan hanke-woods/Mari. The exquisite cover is by Jean Clissold.

All this -- more than 150 skillfully written and beautifully illustrated pages -- can be ordered by sending a check or money order for \$18.00, payable to Joy Harrison in U.S. dollars only, to:

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THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER

THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER is a British-media fanzine from OSIRIS Publications. Issue #5 features stories, poetry, and art from the universes of BLAKE'S 7, DOCTOR WHO, and ROBIN OF SHERWOOD.

Representing BLAKE'S 7 is "Too Costly at Any Price," a new feature story by Kathy Hintze. Villa survived a murderous attack by a friend; now, he wants revenge. And his instrument of vengeance awaits him -- in Dorian's Cave. Also, "Ask the Right Question" by Jeannie Webster, which helps us better understand both a frightened thief and a murderous computer technician.

For fans of DOCTOR WHO, we offer "Brigadier's Beltane" by Yvonne-Lorraine Hein, in which a stiff-necked military martinet becomes a man of flesh, and blood, and feelings. In "The Olympiad of Death" by Barbara Mater, we travel to the Winter Olympics in Canada with Doctor #3 and Jo Grant, where we encounter a storm that defies all logic, and British athletes who cannot lose. "The Dance of the Endevi" by Kathie Hughes introduces us -- and Sarah Jane Smith -- to some of our nearest and most fascinating galactic neighbours. And rounding out these offerings is new DOCTOR WHO poetry by the talented Beth Bowles.

In the universe of ROBIN OF SHERWOOD, Marion is taken by force from her sanctuary at Halstead and offered as a prize in a tournament hosted by King John; Gisburne wants her for his own, but first, he must defeat the sinister Black Knight in "All the King's Horses" by L.A. Carr. "The Earl's Daughter," written by Glenna Hershberger, brings a new problem to Sherwood, ensnaring Robin and his entire outlaw band; all they want is the girl's dowry, but they get a lot more than they bargain for. And in "Adsum..." by Lisa Mudano, the Lady Marion returns to Sherwood for one last glimpse of the man she loves. Plus heart-rending poetry by Jeanine Hennig, and a preview of "The August King" by Linda Ruth Pfonner, coming early in 1990.

Art for THE SONIC SCREWDRIVER's 1989 Issue 1 is by Pat Cash, Toni Hardeman, Jenni, Gennie Summers, and Hugo-winner Joan hanke-woods/Delphyne Mori; the magnificent colour cover depicting "The Archer" is by Delphyne Mori. Both the cover and some of the interior art have been reproduced in a format suitable for framing.

All this -- nearly 200 skillfully written and beautifully illustrated pages -- can be ordered by sending a check or money order for \$25.00, payable to Joy Harrison in U.S. dollars only, to:

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IMAGINATION

In the earliest days of science fiction fandom, fanzines contained original short fiction by some of the finest of aspiring writers. Then, for a long time, as more and more of those writers became professionals, those same fanzines became filled with commentary and news, and fiction began to disappear from their pages.

Along came the media fiction zine, filled with stories derived from television and cinematic sources. Some were good, some were mediocre -- and others were downright dreadful. But whatever their quality, the true originality of the first fanzines was gone. Many fans looked askance at the media publications, and feared originality was gone from fanzines for good.

Not so. For OSIRIS Publications has gone back to the beginning, back to the first concept of the fanzine. In the finest tradition of fandom's earliest years, we proudly present **IMAGINATION**, a new fanzine for today's discerning science fiction fan -- a fanzine devoted entirely to original works of fantasy and science fiction.

IMAGINATION #1, our premiere issue, includes "The Tale-Spinner" by B.M. Caspar, a gripping story of nightmares and destiny; "Gnome de Plume" by Linda Wood, complete with sinister bar and flame-lit cavern; "Laurie's Soldier" by aspiring professional Barbara Mater, featuring a visit to the American Civil War and the Wilderness Campaign; and "Coming Home" by Lisa Mudano, in which a notorious rebel leader pays a visit to the world that drove her into exile. Rounding out the zine are poems by Mary Robertson, and the revelation of the truth about a man named George and a certain dragon...

Illustrations for **IMAGINATION #1** are by Dorinda Francis, Toni Hardeman, and Kate Soehnlen. The zine also includes a beautiful portfolio of original fantasy and science fiction art by Hugo-winner Joan hanke-woods/Mari; these appear in a format suitable for framing.

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